Red Rears for Rose and Rouge
Chapter 7: Live and Learn the Hard Way
By Yu May

Vanilla the Rabbit whistled a gentle tune to herself, before her ears perked up at the sound of footsteps. “Oh, my! You look lovely, Amy, dear.”

Cream the Rabbit giggled. “That’s a pretty classy outfit, Amy.”

Amy beamed, and spun a pirouette. She had donned her magenta button-up dress, with a white sash. “Thanks! I haven’t worn this little number since my playwriter’s retreat at Seaside Island.”

Cream blinked. “You wrote a stage play? So, what’s the plot?”

“Ah yes, *A Rose Without Thorns!* It’s a sordid romance, about a pair of young, first-true-lovers destined to–”

Abruptly, Vanilla cleared her throat. “Ahem! And Miss Rouge? Is she ready to help us… cook?”

Rouge dropped down from the ceiling, landing with a theatrical flourish. “Ta da! How’s this for a knockout?”

There was a long pause as they all took in the sight of Rouge. She was wearing a purple sports coat with white bellbottoms, and matching high-heels. But because she was only wearing a black, strapless bandeau underneath, Rouge’s midriff was left exposed.

Cream giggled. “I can see your belly button!”

Vanilla sighed softly. “That’s… not too bad for a formal dinner actually. But I think you forgot the shirt.”

Rouge looked down at her toned, tanned tummy. “What? But that would throw off the color coordination. The black top ties together my belt and bat wings.”

Vanilla took a long, sharp breath through her nose. “It’s a little casual, but… I suppose it is summer, after all. And you’ll have an apron too.”

Rouge’s eyes popped open, and her bountiful breasts seemed to deflate slightly. “Oh, yeah… We’re still on serving duty tonight.”

Vanilla put a hand on each of their shoulders. “Miss Amy, Miss Rouge, I just want to say… I’m very proud of you girls for agreeing to take responsibility for what you did, and working so hard to make things right. It’s only your first day, but I believe you’ve both shown an immense improvement in your behavior and attitude. So, with that in mind…”

Vanilla reached down and patted both girls on their seats. “Let’s all try our best to have a pleasant dinner with our friends tonight. Agreed?”

Amy and Rouge both nodded, and returned Vanilla’s hug. “Yes, ma’am.”

Cream flew into view, wearing her mother’s overly large, “Kiss the Cook!” apron. “Then let’s get cooking, Mama!”

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They had already prepared desserts from last night: Amy had made her personal favorite strawberry shortcake, Cream had prepared a peppermint cake especially for Tails, while Vanilla had made her prize-winning carrot-upside-down cake. Rouge had struggled with cake-baking, and so settled on preparing a fruit bowl with extra grapes for Knuckles the Echidna.

Vanilla started a pot of chilli slow-cooking. Amy tossed a salad with nuts, while Rouge volunteered to man the grill.

Rouge whistled as she set down the first tray of jumbo-frank-style hot dogs. “I’d better put on a pot of coffee, too. Shadow always likes a plain cup o’ joe, black as night.”

Vanilla hummed. “How sweet! You’ve really gotten to know Mr. Shadow well over the years, haven’t you?”

Rouge hummed. “Yeah, we always seem to end up on the same squad whenever there’s trouble. You know, people tend to assume that Shadow’s a moody, dour bad-boy, but when you get to know him in person, he’s really nothing like that at all. Everyone just got the wrong idea of him because of the whole Eclipse Cannon incident.”

Cream set down her mint cake, and looked at Rouge with skepticism. “You mean when you, Mr. Shadow, and Dr. Robotnik exploded half the moon?”

Rouge made a whistling sort of noise through her nose, and flashed her fangs in a big smile. “That happened while I was acting as an *undercover agent* to infiltrate Eggman’s terrorist operation.”

Amy nodded. “I remember that day. Even with Sonic leading us, I was afraid we weren’t going to make it, until Shadow had his change of heart. You’re right, Rouge. I don’t think he ever wanted to be a bad guy in the first place. He just needed… to remember who he was supposed to be.”

“Yes, yes. It was a very dramatic affair, with him laying down his life to save the world. Falling to his doom from outer space and all. Then there was the whole amnesia thing where we weren’t

sure if he was an android or not, and that whole deal his dad being a weird, alien, devil-dude trying to corrupt his spirit. But I gotta' say, Shadow's really conquered his demons."

Cream rested her chin on her hands. "Miss Rouge, do you have a crush on Mister Shadow?"

Rouge blushed. "Of course not! Shadow is like a brother to me is all!"

Amy shrugged. "Yeah. Besides, Mister Knuckles is the one who she's always playing footsie with."

"Knux and I do not play *footsie!* We simply have a shared interest in kick-boxing martial arts techniques! … And he has a pretty good eye for gemology, now that I think about it."

Cream started singing. "Miss Rouge and Knuckles-or-Shadow, sitting in a tree… K-I-S-S-I-N-G! First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in a baby carriage!"

Vanilla set down her tray, and glared at Cream. "That's quite enough, Cream. That kind of teasing is unbecoming of a young lady. And girls who tease… wind up over knees. Understood?"

Cream's ears drooped. "Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry for teasing you, Miss Rouge."

Rouge shrugged. "Eh, no harm, no foul."

Cream turned to Vanilla, shuffling her feet. "And I'm sorry for being rude, Mother. Do you think I need a reminder spanking, to help me remember to be more ladylike?"

Vanilla patted Cream on the head. "I forgive you, Cream. What do you think, Cream? Do you need a reminder spanking today?"

Cream played with the hem of her skirt. "I think… I can remember to mind my manners, without the spanking."

Vanilla kissed Cream on the nose. "Then I don't think you need a reminder spanking either. Just remember to mind your manners at dinner tonight."

Cream returned the kiss. "I will. And if I forget to remember, please remember to spank me… for forgetting. Do we have a deal?"

Vanilla hugged cream. "We have a deal, my sweet cream. Now, let's serve the table. Our guests should be arriving any minute now."

Amy puffed her pink hair-quills out of her eyes. "Sonic will be fashionably late, as usual."

Cream giggled. “Yes, but knowing Auntie Bunnie, she and Antoine will be fashionably early, as usual.”

Vanilla frowned as she peeked out the window. “I hope they make good time. There’s a storm brewing. I’d hate for Gemerl to rust.”

Vanilla pulled Amy and Rouge aside, and whispered in their ears. “Amy, Rouge, I’d like you both to stand back and serve the other guests as they arrive. Don’t worry, I’ll keep two seats open for you both at the foot of the table. Then, after everyone is served, I’ll introduce you as my guests, and invite you to sit.”

Rouge narrowed her eyes. “Introduce us? But I’ve met Princess Sally before.”

“Yes, but since you were not invited to this get-together by Princess Sally, that means you are here as my private houseguests. It’s proper custom when welcoming royalty to introduce you, even if you already know each other.”

Amy tapped her index fingers together. “Do you think… Princess Sally will be upset to see us here?”

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll understand. You know Princess Sally doesn’t care much for courtly procedure, but I like to cross the t’s and dot the i’s anyway when it comes to good manners.”

Amy swallowed a dry lump in her throat. It wasn’t the royal manners she was worried about. It was seeing Sally herself. *“What if I forget to behave myself in front of all these people? What if I spill something on her? What if they ask what I’m doing here? I’ll have to tell the truth, right? Oh no, I’m gonna get spanked for sure!”* thought Amy.

Then, the door bell rang. Sure enough, it was Bunnie “Rab-bot” d’Coolette. The moment Vanilla opened the door, Bunnie burst in and pulled her into a rough bearhug. “Howdy, sugarcube.”

Antoine d’Coolette fixed his pristine hair as he strolled in meekly, and kissed Vanilla lightly on both cheeks. “Bonjour, Madame Vanille. I hope we are not too–how you say–fashionably early, non?”

Vanilla beamed, then returned Antoine’s light kisses. “You’re always welcome, and you’re always fashionable, Antoine.”

Bunnie hummed. “Woah, coz. Kissing my husband? Now you’ve gone and made me jealous. C’mere.”

Bunnie kissed Vanilla full on the lips, then kissed her husband likewise. “There. That’s a country-style welcome.”

Bunnie spotted Amy Rose, and broke free of the embrace. As she strode across the room, Bunnie's robotic prosthetic limbs whirred softly. When Dr. Robotnik had tried to roboticize them as children years ago, Bunnie had been rescued only after losing her left arm and both her legs to the machine. "Amy, hon? So you got an invite? Finally! I've been saying for years you're more'n ready to be promoted to leadership on the Freedom Fighters."

Amy choked as she immediately realized the awkwardness of her situation. "Oh, no, I haven't exactly been invited here as a Freedom Fighter… I just happened to be staying as a guest at Vanilla's house this week. She and my parents go way back, you see."

Bunnie blinked. "Oh? Well, we're mighty pleased to have you!"

Amy clutched her arm. A dark thought crossed her mind. *"If Princess Sally heard about how I tried to go after a Chaos Emerald…"*

After the disastrous incident with the magic Ring of Acorn, Princess Sally had flatly refused to allow Amy to join the Freedom Fighters. Instead, to her complete emotional devastation, Amy had been sent back to her old elementary school, while still trapped in the body of a teenager. After they had partially undone the curse of the ring, Sally had waited a full two years to offer Amy junior membership as a Freedom Fighter, and yet another two years before promoting Amy to the status of full membership.

Amy tried to force a smile. "I'm happy to serve. Care for a bit of carrot-upside-down cake?"

They passed a few minutes amiably. Antoine told his old war story about that one time he'd saved Sonic the Hedgehog's life, which most of them had heard at least a hundred times, but they didn't mind. Somehow, Antoine's war stories always brought new, unexpected plot twists with each retelling.

The doorbell rang again. This time, Rouge flew to answer it. "I'll get it!"

She flung open the door to reveal the stern, straight figure of Shadow the Hedgehog. Curiously, he was dressed in a jet black suit, with a red power tie. Behind him, black storm clouds were rumbling in the distance, and there was a crack of lightning. Shadow's voice was low, and menacing. "Good evening. Thank you for inviting me to your home."

He took a second look at Rouge. "Rouge? What are you doing in Vanilla's house? You're not trying to steal from her, I hope."

Rouge pouted. "What? Of course not! I'll have you know… I'm here in Floral Forest for sight-seeing, and Vanilla was kind enough to let me crash here!"

Slowly, Shadow glanced left and right. There were less than a dozen small cottages in the entirety of Floral Forest village. "Sight seeing, are you? Funny, you never struck me as the type

to vacation in a small town. I thought you preferred to tour big city art museums on your days off… *after* closing hours."

Rouge puffed up her chest. "So what? I can't *also* enjoy the rustic charms of a rural village? You should know me well enough by now to know I'm the type to have a few surprises up my sleeve."

Shadow nodded. "Of course. It's just that I never figured you were also the cozy, homemaker type. Nice apron, by the way. It suits you."

Rouge's face turned beet red, and she smoothed the apron across her bosom. "Thank you. I'd say I'm rocking it."

Shadow averted his gaze from Rouge's breasts, and strode to the dining room table. "Mrs. Vanilla, I apologize for my tardiness."

Vanilla glanced at the clock. "Oh, no need to worry. You're not that late. It's only one minute after six."

"Precisely. We were delayed by a surprise attack from the Eggman Empire on Cocoa Island."

"Is Gemerl all right?"

"Last I saw him, he was helping clear up the remnants of Dr. Robotnik's forces. I had to hasten here to warn you... I'm afraid the others will be late as well. "

Vanilla beamed. "Thank you, Mister Shadow. Won't you join us?"

Cream patted the empty seat next to her. "I'm saving this seat for Mr. Tails. But if you want, you can sit across from me, Mister Shadow. You're the guest of honor, so you may have the seat to the right of the head of the table."

Shadow nodded, and started pulling off his coat. As he did, he revealed a holstered pistol. Vanilla's ears stood on end. "Mr. Shadow? You brought your firearm?"

Shadow glanced down at the holstered weapon. "Of course. I came here directly from the battle."

Vanilla took a slow breath. "I'm a tad worried about having firearms around Cream."

Shadow nodded. "Of course, Vanilla. That is a completely reasonable concern. Cream, listen carefully…"

Shadow knelt beside Cream and pulled out his pistol, pointing it away from the table. “This is a firearm. Specifically, it is my Heckler and Koch USP Tactical model handgun, for concealed carry. Now, although it is true that firearms are an essential tool for self-defense, they are also dangerous, and should never be handled by children. Of course, I never leave my firearm unattended, but if you ever see a gun that’s been left out in the open, what should you do?”

Cream eyed the handgun with intense interest. “I know I should never touch it. I suppose I’d better tell an adult or a policeman if I see a gun, right, Mr. Shadow?”

Shadow nodded, then removed the clip from his handgun. “Exactly. You should only ever handle a gun after completing a certified firearms safety course. But just in case, it wouldn’t hurt for you to know the basics…”

With lightning reflexes, Shadow opened the gun. “This is called the slide. While cleaning a gun, *after* you unload it, you should always rack the slide, just in case a bullet was left in the chamber. Even after you unload a gun, always treat a gun as if it were loaded. For example, you must never point it at someone, not even as a joke. While handling a gun, keep the safety on, and keep your finger off the trigger. See how I’m holding it? This is called trigger discipline.”

“Discipline? Isn’t that like getting a spanking?”

“Not quite. Trigger discipline means you never touch the trigger, until you’re ready to fire at the enemy in a self-defense situation. In that case, you want to aim the first two shots at the center of mass, then aim the third shot at the target’s head. Just remember, ‘Put two in the chest, the head for the rest.’”

Cream gasped with delight. “Wow! I had no idea guns were so cool!”

Vanilla nodded curtly. “Yes, thank you, Mister Shadow, I appreciate your concern. But do you think it would be possible for you to put that gun away somewhere safe?”

Shadow nodded. “Of course. May I borrow your gun safe?”

Mrs. Vanilla grimaced. “But I don’t own a gun safe.”

Shadow narrowed his eyes. “That’s unwise. It’s best to have one to safely store your guns.”

“But… I don’t own any guns.”

For one full second, Shadow stared at Vanilla. “... I see. In that case, it would be best for me to keep it on my person at all times. Cream, here are a couple more safety tips. After performing routine maintenance, you should reload your gun. Once loaded, remember to rack the slide to chamber a round, and keep it properly holstered. That way, you can shoot right away if you’re attacked right away.”

With a practiced motion, Shadow racked the slide, then demonstrated his aiming technique. “Some poorly made guns carry greater risk of an accidental discharge, but I’ve never had this problem emerge with my Heckler and Koch, given proper maintenance. I’ll show you how to practice your quick-draw and fire technique at the gun range, once you’re old enough to take the safety course. But until then, you must *not* touch my firearms. Do you understand?”

Cream’s eyes shone. “Yes, sir, Mister Shadow! And, Mother? Don’t worry! I promise to never, ever touch a gun. Not until I’m old enough to take the firearm safety course!”

Vanilla took a slow, trembling breath. “Thank you, Cream. I know you’ll keep your promise… Mr. Shadow, why don’t we all have a seat, and tuck in?”

Carefully, Shadow holstered his gun, then seated himself. He stared at the smorgasbord of chilli dogs, fruit salads, regular salads, and desserts. “But shouldn’t we wait for the others to arrive?”

Bunnie shrugged, and held up a plate of cake. “Aw, shucks, it’s your party ain’t it, hon? Sit down and have a slice of cake.”

Shadow took the plate, staring at it, then set it down in front of him, without the slightest change of expression. “Thank you. I will wait to have my dessert after I have finished the main course.”

Rouge sniffed, then leaned over to pour out a black coffee for Shadow. “Oh, c’mon, handsome. Just this once, can’t we be a little bit… *bad?”*

A bolt of lightning cracked in the distance, illuminating Shadow’s stoic face as he ignored Rouge’s breasts, which were hanging an inch from his nose. “No. For I have renounced the path of darkness and revenge. I have vowed to serve the people of this planet, as a righteous, dark knight. Therefore, no matter how tempting I find this delicious-looking slice of cake, I will wait until after supper, before I partake.”

Slowly, Shadow took a sip of coffee. “Thank you for the coffee, Rouge. Perfect, as always.”

The door slammed open, revealing a group of shadowy figures, and with a crack of lightning, a red-eyed robot appeared inside the door. “I have returned!”

Just as she was about to take a sip of tea, Mrs. Vanilla stiffened. “Mr. Gemerl, you nearly made me jump out of my slippers. Please remember to ring the bell before entering, especially when we have guests.”

Gemerl stepped into the light of the dining room, before hesitating. “My apologies, Mrs. Vanilla. Updating ‘polite manners’ protocols. Running test session.”

The robot stepped right back out, and slammed the door behind him. Then, the door bell rang. Casually, Mrs. Vanilla turned to her daughter. “Cream, would you answer that? I do believe it’s Mr. Gemerl.”

“Yes, Mother!” Beaming, Cream fluttered to the front door, and opened. “Good evening, Mister Gemerl, we’re so glad you made it back home in time.”

Another crack of lightning illuminated Gemerl from behind. “Good evening, Miss Cream. I am pleased to inform you that the Eggman Empire’s forces have been completely routed! We have met the enemy, and we have emerged victorious! Also, I took the liberty of escorting some of our guests home. Downloading proper procedure for courtly etiquette. Complete. May I present: Mr. Knuckles of Angel Island…”

Knuckles the Echidna stomped into the room, wearing a poncho and a slick cowboy hat. “Well, Tails, we made it. Despite your directions.”

With a slurp, Rouge the bat took a sudden sip of coffee, then stuck out her tongue. “Ack! Hot!”

“... Mr. Miles ‘Tails’ Prower of West Side Island…”

Tails shuffled in behind Knuckles, then sneezed. “Achoo! Hey everyone! Pardon my sneeze. Got caught in the rain on the way over. Hope I didn’t catch a cold.”

Cream the Rabbit adjusted the empty seat next to her, careful to look at the ceiling. “Then I’d better pour you something hot to drink, right away! Have a seat, Mr. Tails. Would you prefer coffee, tea, or hot cocoa?”

Tails sniffed, and took his seat. “Oh? Thanks! Hot cocoa please. Do you have marshmallows?”

With a snap, Cream produced a steaming mug of hot cocoa, as if from nowhere. “And graham crackers with cinnamon!”

Tails found his seat, and took a sip. “Wow, Just the way I like it! Thanks, Cream.”

Gemerl gestured toward the door, which framed a single, silhouetted figure in a cloak. “And finally, may I present…”

Amy Rose stood straight to attention, holding a tray of chilli dogs in her trembling hands. *“Then this has to be Sonic!”* she thought. *“He’s gonna see me in an apron! Oh, gosh, which apron do I have on? It’s not the chilli dog cook-off champion one, is it?”*

Trembling, Amy stared at her chest, and saw she was wearing a plain, white apron. *“Phew! Well, it could be worse, I guess.”*

Then, Gemerl bowed low, and stepped back from the door. “... Princess Sally of the House of Acorn!”

A final bolt of lightning cracked above their heads, and Princess Sally pulled down her hood to reveal herself. Casually, she brushed aside her dripping wet hair, and hung her cloak. “Good evening, Mrs. Vanilla. We apologize for our late arrival. I’m afraid Sonic had to stay behind to mop up a few stragglers, so he won’t be able to join us until later. Thank you for offering to host.”

Vanilla and Cream both stood, and curtsied. Vanilla bowed her head low, and gestured to the seat at the head of the table. “I am honored, your highness. You’re welcome to sit at the head of the table.”

Sally waved a hand, and grabbed the first seat at the foot of the table. “Thanks, Vanilla, but there’s no need for that fru fru stuff when we’re meeting on Freedom Fighter business. When I’m among friends, I’m just Sally.”

Vanilla nodded. “Of course, Sally, dear. Also, I have a couple guests staying with me. I hope you won’t mind if they join us tonight? Amy and Rouge.”

Sally’s attention snapped to Amy. “Oh, you made it, Amy? That’s perfect. Here, have a seat next to me. I’d been meaning to speak with you about–”

As she finally noticed Rouge, Sally did a double take. “Ah–hello, Rouge. Haven’t seen you since we wrapped up the last hunt for the Chaos Emeralds during the time travel kerfuffle. I didn’t know you and Vanilla… knew each other so well.”

Rouge forced a smile, then quickly poured Princess Sally a coffee. “Oh! Vanilla and I go way back! She’s like… the big sister I never had!”

Tails finished the last of his hot cocoa, leaving behind a chocolatey marshmallow mustache. “Huh, kind of like me and Sonic… except he’s like my big brother, not my big sister.”

Cream sighed, watching Tails with starry eyes. “Yeah… it’s nice to have someone looking out for you.”

Knuckles harrumphed as he took his seat, then stuffed an entire bunch of grapes in his mouth. “Let’s make this quick. I get nervous leaving the Master Emerald unattended any longer than I have to.”

Cheese the Chao floated into view from behind Cream. “Chao, chao? Cho-cho-Chao?”

Knuckles waved a gloved fist. “Yes, Omochao is perfectly capable. I just don’t like leaving the poor guy alone on that island for too long. He gets lonely.”

Rouge leaned over to pour Knuckles a cup of coffee. “Nothing to worry, Big Red. It’s not like I’m going to steal the Master Emerald if you’re away from it for more than two minutes.”

Knuckles slammed his fist against the table, sending his coffee cup wobbling dangerously. “You’d better not try it, bat-girl!”

Rouge sniffed, and mopped up the spill. “Careful, Knucklehead! That’s hot coffee! And I’d never dream of it. I have no interest in stealing the Master Emerald… Not unless I can snatch it from right under your nose, that is. Otherwise, what’s the fun?”

Knuckles slammed his fist even harder, sending a ripple through the table. “Lady! I don’t want to hit a woman if I don’t have to, so don’t make me have to!”

Rouge dusted off her bosom. “Huh. And here I thought you were a male feminist.”

Knuckles jabbed a finger at Rouge. “I’m not a male feminist! I respect women! Eggman’s the only womanizing, male feminist pig I know!”

Tails frowned. “Um, Knuckles, I think you mean ‘male chauvinist pig’?”

Rouge shrugged, then slyly sat herself on the empty chair between Shadow and Knuckles. “Eh. Both are pretty apt terms to describe Dr. Robotnik, if you ask me. At least Lex Luthor *pretended* to be a gentleman.”

Shadow scoffed. “Bah. Don’t remind me of that bald, obsessive, egotistical, megalomaniac.”

“Which one? Eggman, or Luthor?”

“You know the one. What did you even see in him? Name one good thing about him.”

“Well, he’s stinking rich. So there’s at least a few *billion* good things in his bank account.”

Knuckles froze. “Hold on, Rouge! What are you doing in Mrs. Vanilla’s house, anyway? You’re not planning to steal her Chaos Emerald, are you?”

Rouge grimaced. “Not at this precise moment, I’m not.”

Shadow glared at Rouge. “Then why are you here, exactly? Are you in some kind of trouble again?”

Rouge’s eyes popped open. “Ahem! … A girl’s entitled to have a few secrets.”

Ignoring the furious argument between Rouge, Knuckles, and Shadow, Princess Sally leaned over to whisper in Amy's ear. "Amy, we need to have a serious discussion, regarding the Chaos Emeralds."

Amy felt a shiver travel up her spine. This was it. Somehow, Princess Sally had heard all about her foolhardy escapades. "I'm so, so sorry, Princess Sally."

Sally raised an eyebrow. "Sorry for what?"

Amy hunched her shoulders. "For everything I did yesterday. I really messed up. I hope you can forgive me, for breaking your trust."

"Amy, what are you–"

There was a crack of lightning, so close that the roar of thunder shook the roof. Everyone tensed as the lights flickered overhead. Slowly, the thunderclap faded to an echo, and the lights came back on.

Tails shivered. "Ugh… lightning."

Knuckles slammed both his fists against the table this time. "What's keeping that blue screwball, anyway?"

Nervously, Tails checked his wristwatch. "By my estimation, Sonic should have mopped up those last few badniks ten times over by now!"

Clinging tight to Tails arm, Cream quickly pulled back, her ears drooping. "It's not safe for anyone to be out in this weather. Not even Mister Sonic."

Then, the door bell rang.

Amy heard the sound reverberating against the back of her skull, as if she was underwater. Sally already knew Amy's secret. Now Sonic would know too. Slowly, Amy stood from her seat. It was time for her to face her final humiliation. "That must be him now. I'll get it."

Sally held Amy's hand. "Amy? Are you all right? You're a paler shade of pink than usual."

Amy felt tears budding in her eyes. No. Amy wasn't all right. She was a bad girl. She was nothing but trouble. "I… I'm not…"

Quickly, Vanilla stood and strode to the foot of the table. "Amy, dear, you've had a long, tiring day. Have a seat. I'll see Sonic to his seat."

Shaking, Amy sat back down next to Sally. “Princess Sally, I know I screwed up. I know this isn’t the right time, but… I have to know! Are you gonna kick me out of the Freedom Fighters for this?”

Sally furrowed her eyebrows. “Amy Rose, I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. But if you have something you’d like to get off your chest, you can tell me. Don’t be ashamed. Whatever it is, I promise I won’t be angry.”

Amy wiped her eyes. “Huh? You didn’t hear how I got in trouble again? But then, why were you so worried about the Chaos Emeralds? What’s going–”

Vanilla opened the door. A blue hedgehog was standing at the entrance. He was wearing a black traveling cloak, and had a brown scarf wrapped tightly across his face. Gently, Vanilla grabbed him by the wrist. “Sonic? Thank goodness, you made it! Come in, quickly, before you catch your death of–”

There was a crack of light, and Sonic the Hedgehog’s face was briefly lit by the eerie light. But as she saw his eyes, Amy Rose instantly knew something was wrong.

Sonic’s eyes weren’t green. They were glowing bright red.

Amy screamed a warning, and leapt to her feet. “Vanilla! Get down! That’s not–”

Sonic the Hedgehog held up a Chaos Emerald, as blood red as his eyes, holding it an inch away from Vanilla’s stunned face. “Chaos… Blast!”

There was a blinding flash of light, followed by a terrific explosion. Amy heard the sound of everyone behind her, screaming.

The last thing Amy Rose saw was a wall of red flames, engulfing Vanilla and Sonic, before the blast ripped through the walls and roof of the rabbit family cottage.

Amy’s entire world went black.

End of Chapter 7

Red Rears for Rose and Rouge
Chapter 8: His World of Pain

A deep voice echoed through the darkness. “Chaos… Control!”

Amy Rose found herself standing on the grass in the middle of Floral Forest Village’s center. She glanced around, and saw the other dinner guests, before she heard a second explosion. Then she turned, and saw Vanilla and Cream’s house disintegrate in a pillar of red fire.

With a crackle of white lightning, Shadow the Hedgehog blinked into existence, cradling Rouge the Bat in one arm. In his other hand, he clutched an opaque, yellow gem that resembled the golden Chaos Emerald. Then, Shadow stumbled to his knees, his black suit in tatters. “Saved… everyone… That blue hedgehog…”

There was a blue blur, and with a Sonic boom, the blue hedgehog with the red eyes crashed into Shadow, clotheslining him. Rouge tumbled to the ground as Shadow was sent spiraling and rolling, before he came crashing to a halt into the front wall of the cottage on the opposite side of the street.

The blue hedgehog seemed to flicker into existence, before holding up the red Chaos Emerald, aiming it at Shadow’s prone body.

Amy saw Knuckles gliding through the air over her head. At the last moment before the blue hedgehog could unleash another blast of red chaos energy, Knuckles dove down, slamming his fists together to create a burst of red energy, and slammed his fist into the ground where the blue hedgehog had been standing. It left an impact crater, but the blue hedgehog was nowhere to be seen.

Tails flew into the air, and called down. “He’s trying to pick us off! Everybody, get back-to-back, before–”

Amy felt a rush of wind as the blue blur whipped past her face, and used a flying spin dash attack to slam into Gemerl’s chest. The robot caught the spinning blue ball of doom before it could rip a hole through him, but the force of the impact sent him flying backwards and crashing onto his back. They slid at least a hundred feet along gravel before Gemerl managed to kick out from under the blue hedgehog. Tails dove down and snatched up Gemerl by the arm to help him roll back to his feet. At that moment, the blue blur made a tight turn around a lamp post, and made a second charge at them, emerging from its ball form.

As Tails carried Gemerl back to the central group, the robot fired a quick blast with his arm cannon, but the blue hedgehog was already gone.

Vanilla’s neighbors were starting to open their windows and doors, panic building as the citizens of Floral Forest Village gradually realized the danger.

Knuckles carried Shadow's limp body back to the central group. "Circle up, you idiots!"

Sally stood to her full height, and touched each of the pale-blue rings on her wrist. With a crackle of glowing, blue-white energy, two Ring-Blades materialized on the backs of her hands. "You heard him, everyone! Protect the injured! Eyes up for his next charge!"

Amy looked around her. Rouge looked like she was dazed. Vanilla was lying flat on the ground, silent, her eyes closed. Cream was cradling her mother's head in her lap, her eyes wide. "... Mother? What happened to you, Mommy? Wake up!"

Bunnie Rabbot knelt beside Cream and Vanilla, shielding them with her robotic left arm. "It's all right, shug! I've got you both covered. Everything's gonna be okay!"

Something like a jagged streak of blue lightning twisted through the group, aiming at the unconscious body of Vanilla the Rabbit. Cream screamed, before the blue force slammed into Bunnie Rabbot's left side. For a moment, it looked like Cream and Bunnie simply vanished, before Amy saw them come rolling to a halt in the gravel, away from the group.

Bunnie was still cradling Cream in her arms, but her robotic arm was dented so badly, it was nearly falling off at the elbow.

Antoine d'Coolette spun on his heels, drawing his sword. *"Ma chèrie!"*

Amy felt her feet starting to move on their own. "Bunnie, get back!"

Bunnie hopped to her feet, and handed Cream off to Amy, her left arm hanging on by a few loose wires. "Amy, hon, you gotta take Cream for me."

Antoine appeared by his wife's side, holding his sword aloft as he glanced around wildly.

Then, just as Amy took Cream in her arms, something snatched Bunnie away from them, carrying her by the twisted remains of her left arm.

The blue hedgehog spun Bunnie in a circle, before her left arm snapped off and she went flying into the remains of Mrs. Vanilla's woodshed. This seemed to catch the blue hedgehog off guard. It stumbled for a moment, holding up the twisted scrap of metal that was once a working arm, and casually tossed it aside.

Antoine snarled, and made a lunging thrust at the blue hedgehog. *"Scélérat bleu!* You dare to lay hands on my wife? She was unarmed, you—you—*babare! En garde!"*

The blue hedgehog dove forward, past the tip of Antoine's sword, caught him by the arm, and decked him in the stomach. Antoine choked, before the blue hedgehog spun him in a circle,

whipping his cloak like a matador's cape, and physically threw the stunned coyote toward the woodshed.

Antoine landed hard on his back, and came rolling to a halt beside the unconscious Bunnie. The husband and wife both lay still, as if sharing a tender embrace in their sleep.

Then, the blue hedgehog tossed the sword aside and whipped off its black traveler's cloak, staring Amy right in the eyes as he revealed himself.

Amy felt her breath go cold. There could be no doubt. It wasn't one of Sonic's copycats, like Scourge or Metal Sonic. It wasn't a robot at all. Except for the red eyes, it was Sonic the Hedgehog. Her Sonic. He was wearing the same cocky smile she'd seen a thousand times before, whenever he was helping people. Then, Amy blinked, and Sonic was gone.

Shivering, Amy retreated back to the group, holding Cream. "It's Sonic!"

Shadow choked, then noticed he was being carried like a small child in another man's arms. "Put me down! I'm fine! I'm the only one here who can keep up with him!"

Knuckles snarled. "Shut up! Whatever that thing is, it's not Sonic. Not even *he* can move like that."

Shadow held up his opaque gem. "He's using the power of Chaos Control! I saw it myself when–"

The moment that Knuckles set Shadow back on his feet, there was a snap like a whip crack, and Sonic appeared in mid air, landing a flying jump side kick right at Knuckles' face. With a snarl, the red echidna was knocked through the air away the circle formation, before the force of Sonic's kick slammed him down into the dirt, face-first.

Knuckles swung a wild haymaker, but Sonic vanished, and Knuckles' punch pulverized the sidewalk pavement. He stood, spitting out mud and gravel. "Sonic! That was a cheap shot! Come out and fight, you runt!"

Sonic blinked into existence behind Knuckles, landing a stylish butterfly kick to the back of the red echidna's dreadlocked noggin. The moment that Knuckles stumbled forward, Sonic disappeared, then reappeared in front of him, and pulled Knuckles forward into a judo throw. Knuckles roared as he was flipped forward, then gasped as he landed hard on his back, knocking the wind out of him.

Casually, Sonic cricked his neck, twice.

Tails flew down between Knuckles and Sonic. "Sonic! Stop this! What's happened to you?"

There was a sound of hooting laughter from above them. “Oh, come now, Tailsey, I’m disappointed…”

Dr. Ivo Julius “Eggman” Robotnik appeared from the sky, piloting his armored Egg-o-Matic hovercraft. Eggman twisted his mustache. “... Use that engineer’s brain of yours. Surely you can figure it out!”

Knuckles groaned, and tried to stand, supporting himself on his knees. “Eggman? I should have known you were behind this.”

Eggman made a “zip your lip” motion with his hand. “Shush, Knuckle, old chum! The three-digit-IQ-havers are talking.”

Sally put up her dukes, gritting her teeth. “It’s a trick! The eyes are wrong. That’s just some new robot model, like the Shadow Androids. Or you dressed up Metal Sonic in new armor.”

Eggman sneered, and punched his thumb and fingers together with a look of wild glee. “Ah, a creative suggestion, Princess Sally. But I’m afraid you’re rather off the mark. You see, when I originally built the Hyper Metal Sonic Mark 1, I designed it specifically to kill the real Sonic. But over the years, my thinking has… evolved, you might say!”

Eggman snapped his fingers, and a shining blue shape dropped out of the sky, landing next to Sonic. Metal Sonic, their old, familiar foe who had gone toe-to-toe with Sonic countless times, stood to its full height, side-by-side with the real Sonic. Metal Sonic held up its arm, and revealed a second Chaos Emerald clutched in its sharp, steel fingers. It was bright gold, like Shadow’s false emerald, but more brilliant in color, and perfectly clear.

Eggman gestured at Metal Sonic with a look of disappointment on his face. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m still quite nostalgic for this old design. But the Metal Sonic project has been constantly disappointing me ever since the initial launch. It’s failed to kill Sonic so many times, I got to thinking, why don’t I simply…”

Eggman gestured to Sonic, beaming with undisguised pride. “... *persuade* Sonic to join the Eggman Empire? Why rely on a cheap copy of Sonic, when I can have the genuine article as my obedient slave?”

Amy held a hand to her mouth. “Then must have found another of the Ancient Relics, like the Cacophonous Conch. Something that allows you to put Sonic under mind-control.”

“Bah! Old world magic? You’re as romantic as always, Amy Rose. You know full well I won’t stoop to using superstitious mumbo-jumbo unless it’s the only possible way to achieve a higher goal: to advance the cause of science itself!”

Sally stood in front of Amy, holding her blades in a defensive guard position. “That didn’t stop you from enslaving yourself to Nagus, when you tried to roboticize our people!”

Eggman’s mustache bristled. “An unfortunate strategic necessity. You’re getting warmer, Princess Sally, but still off the mark, I’m afraid.”

Tails looked at the Chaos Emeralds in horror. “No… Dr. Robotnik, you didn’t! You’re trying to manipulate Chaos energy again?”

Eggman clapped his hands. “Bravo, my boy! You figured it out! But really, think about it. All science is simply a form of ‘manipulation.’”

“Are you insane? The Chaos Emeralds exist beyond the laws of physics in our space-time continuity. They’re not things! They’re each a self-contained singularity! We can’t just… hack into them!”

Eggman gestured at the dull, yellow emerald in Shadow’s hand. “Oh, Miles Prower, you’re such a hypocrite. You were the one who inspired the whole idea! I remembered your cute little trick with that fake chaos emerald.”

“But it never worked like a real one! All the fake Chaos Emerald does is act as a temporary channel for true Chaos. My emerald’s just a high-capacity battery! A decoy!”

Eggman held up his hands. “That’s the problem! You still think like an engineer, Tailsey, not a true scientist. You invent things because you think they will be *useful*… because you want to help your little friends. But you never stop to ask… what is this which my hands have wrought? Just how far can I go with this idea? *You* proved that the structure of a chaos emerald can be artificially reconstructed. And it got me to thinking: if it can be done once, why not do it again? But this time, I was determined to be more… *systematic* about it. When you called it ‘hacking’ you weren’t far off the mark. The Chaos Emeralds work by manipulating the laws of probability, So all I had to do was set up a few thousand A.I. datacenters, and let them get to work on cracking the code for me. Once you understand how the laws of probability function at higher levels, the ‘magic’ of the Chaos Emeralds simply becomes something that can be analyzed with the scientific method. In the past, we’ve used the Chaos Emeralds like nuclear batteries. But I’ve finally figured out how to use them like a tool of *precision.”*

“What you’re doing could easily trigger a chain reaction! You could have erased our entire reality!”

Eggman shrugged. “That was a risk I was willing to take. And it has paid off. Amy Rose, you were stabbing in the right direction when you called it ‘mind control.’ Once I unlocked the ability to fine-tune the powers of the Chaos Emeralds, all I had to do was point it at Sonic while he was distracted with my deception unit, and click the enter key.”

Amy set down Cream, and stood. “Sonic? Listen to me, you have to snap out of it! Fight him!”

Eggman guffawed. “How droll. You’re always good for a laugh, Amy Rose. Listening to you always makes me feel like I’m watching a delightfully cheesy old soap opera. But I’m afraid what I’ve achieved here is nothing at all like those campy Saturday morning cartoons. Like that one where you portray me as a big, fat, pin-headed ignoramus? I simply adore that one! You see, my fine, furry friends, you look at Sonic and believe that he has such a thing as ‘a mind’ or perhaps, ‘a soul.’ But there is no such thing in reality. What we call ‘the mind’ is simply a series of electrical impulses, passing through a complicated, interconnected neural network. What you call ‘thinking’ is no different than what I have accomplished with artificial intelligence, but with significantly greater efficiency, and minimal room for error. All I had to do was choose a different collection of electrical impulses, and the Chaos Emerald restructured the laws of electromagnetism accordingly. In other words, I’m not controlling Sonic at all… He simply wishes to serve me, because for the first time in his life, he’s finally thinking clearly. Therefore–”

Gemerl snapped up his arm, and blasted a beam of energy at Eggman’s face. Eggman’s eyes went wide, before a shimmering glass shield dispersed the energy. “Whoops! Gemerl, you naughty bot. You caught me monologuing! Papa spank!”

The invisible wall in front of Eggman’s face glowed bright orange, then a burst of energy identical to Gemerl’s attack shot backwards and slammed into Gemerl’s chest, knocking him down.

Eggman drummed his fingers on the side of his hovercraft. “Now, despite our previous altercations, I really do prefer to keep the lot of you alive and well. Conquering the world would be no fun without a few wannabe-heroes to make the game more interesting. You especially, Tailsey. In fact, when I’m through establishing the Eggman Empire, I think I’ll adopt you as the son and unpaid-lab-assistant I always wanted but never had. So, out of the kindness of my big, fat heart, I’m giving you all a chance to make a calm, rational, considered choice…”

A mounted machine gun and a frontal cannon both popped out of Eggman’s hovercraft, and as Sonic and Metal Sonic clutched their Chaos Emeralds, both gems started to glow with an internal fire. Eggman sneered. “... Hand over all four of the Chaos Emeralds you have–slowly, and calmly–and I will permit you to live. Refuse, or make one false move, and you will all die. That includes you, Tails, my boy.”

Shadow the Hedgehog snapped to the front of their group, between them and Eggman, holding up the false Chaos Emerald. “Chaos Control!”

Amy saw the machine gun pointing right at her face, then a blast of red and gold light.

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There was a deep, echoing boom, and Amy found herself standing in the woods of Floral Forest. Despite the dim light of twilight, she immediately recognized it as the site of her ill-chosen fight with Rouge and Gemerl from yesterday.

Shadow collapsed onto his hands and knees, gasping. “Ha… Made it… I’m the coolest.”

Amy squeaked. “Where are Cream and Vanilla?”

Shadow scoffed. “Got them… out of town… away from us… Bunnie and Antoine, too. Knowing Dr. Robotnik, he wouldn’t hesitate to kick them while they were down.”

Sally strode to the center of the group. “If Eggman used the Chaos Emeralds to locate us, he’ll be on us any second now. Tails, any ideas to snap Sonic out of Robotnik’s mind control?

Tails knelt and tapped his wrist watch, revealing a keyboard, and started typing furiously. “On it. But I’ll need Nichole 1.0’s help on this.”

Sally pulled a hand-held device out of her vest. “Nichole. Grant full admin access to Miles Tails Prower. Override command 0-7-2-3-1-9-9-1.”

The face of a holographic lynx appeared on Tails’ wrist watch screen, speaking in a calm, dignified British accent. “Access granted. I am at your service, Tails.”

Knuckles took a defensive stance, scanning the woods. “What’s the plan, squirt?”

Tails kept typing. “If I had a few months and a super computer, I could try and reengineer whatever Eggman’s done with the Chaos Emeralds. Unfortunately, that’s off the table. But what he said about electrical impulses got me thinking. Maybe if we just hit Sonic with a light electric shock, we can ‘reboot’ him. Like using a defibrillator. Nicole will help me calculate the proper voltage.”

Knuckles chuckled. “That’s it? It can’t be that simple.”

“Thanks to the extra-dimensional, probability-altering properties of the Chaos Emeralds, it’s approximately a million-to-one shot. But we’ve beat those odds before.”

Shadow leaned against a tree. “That last Chaos Control… took a lot out of me. I don’t think I can pull the same trick a third time… Not without a real Chaos Emerald.”

Rouge groaned, and stood. “I got ‘em… Bloody hell, Shadow, did you drop me on my head or something?”

Shadow wiped a trickle of blood from his lip. “Had to break a window to get you out. Sorry, think I clipped your skull on the frame when I jumped through it.”

“That’s what I get for my heroic rescue? Well, you hardly deserve it, but as a thank you…” Rouge stuffed her hands down her top, and produced two Chaos Emeralds, one pink, and one green. She tossed the pink one to Shadow. “... Here you go, one pink Chaos Emerald, for my tall, dark, and klutzy knight in shining, black armor.”

Rouge shot the second one like a basketball at Knuckles. “And a green one, for Red-head.”

Knuckles stared at the Emerald. “I can’t achieve my Hyper Knuckles state without all seven emeralds, but… I could use this to keep up with the two Sonics.”

With a minxish smile, Rouge fixed her bra. “You can keep that one, as as an apology for all the times I tried and failed to steal from you. The one on Angel Island is the same color, but bigger, so after I *successfully* steal the Master Emerald from you, that little green one can be your memento.”

Knuckles clutched the green emerald tight. “If you lay one finger on the Master Emerald, then so help me, I’ll… I’ll spank you!”

Rouge made a kissy face. “Don’t threaten me with a good time, handsome.”

Tails held out a hand. “Ahem! Could I *perhaps* get a Chaos Emerald?”

Rouge shrugged. “Sorry, kid. You’re cute, but you’ll have to wait a few years before I consider letting you handle my jewelry."

Tails pouted. “Ya’ know, calculating wave functions in the middle of a life-or-death situation isn’t exactly easy.”

Rouge crossed her arms. “Of course. You just make it *look* easy, kiddo. Unfortunately, I don’t have another Chaos Emerald for you. My other one got confiscated.”

Sally held up a hand. “Knock it off, Rouge. Tails, why do you need a Chaos Emerald? Are you planning to go into a Super state, when the fight starts?”

Tails shook his head. “Not without all seven, I can’t. Even then, I can barely achieve the basic Super state, let alone the Hyper state. The only time I managed to transform into Hyper Tails… is when I had Sonic acting as my anchor. I need a Chaos Emerald to act as a focus for the charge. It will drastically improve our odds of success.”

Shadow growled. “Then take this one. I have the pseudo Chaos Emerald to act as a back up.”

Sally shook her head. “No. You and Knuckles are the only ones who have a prayer of keeping up with Sonic in his Super state. Eggman mentioned four chaos emeralds. Where are they?”

Amy stiffened. “Gemerl has one!”

She knelt to examine the robot’s smashed chest, before his lights blinked on, and he snatched her wrist roughly. “Miss Rose… Why are you trying to access my protective chestplate?”

“Gemerl, we need another Chaos Emerald. Please, hurry!”

“But, Mrs. Vanilla…”

“She’s not here. And she’s hurt. Please, Gemerl, this is an emergency… I know I’m not responsible enough to have a Chaos Emerald, but it’s the only way to help Vanilla and Cream.”

Gemerl’s eyes flickered yellow, then green. “Calculations complete… I trust you, Amy Rose.”

With a hiss, Gemerl’s chest plate snapped open, and Amy found the clear Chaos Emerald from before. It was the same one she’d imagined setting in a wedding ring, to foist onto Sonic as a “gift” for her.

Amy tossed it lightly to Tails. “Here’s the third one.”

From the distance, they heard a rumbling boom, like thunder, but much too close. Sally stiffened. “Here they come. Gemerl, where’s the other one?”

Gemerl shook his head. “Answer unknown. Mrs. Vanilla only entrusted me to protect that one.”

Shadow snarled. “What? Where’s that *damn* fourth Chaos Emerald?”

Gemerl’s eyes flickered weakly, before he rose up on his elbows. “The fourth must either be on Vanilla’s person, or hidden in a secret location known only to her.”

Sally held up a hand. “Never mind that! Knuckles, Shadow, you’re our front liners.”

Gemerl shot to his feet. “I will fight for you.”

Sally looked at Gemerl with sympathy. “You’re looking a bit rough, soldier.”

Gemerl slammed his chest. “Armor structural integrity has been reduced to 10% of full capacity. But my internal battery remains fully charged and operational.”

Sally nodded. “Then get to the front line. Amy, Rouge, help me guard Tails. If they break through our front line, he’s our only hope. No matter what it takes, nothing touches Tails.”

There was a second sonic boom, and the trees started to shake. As Amy and Rouge took their positions around Tails, Rouge whispered. “Ames… are you sure you can do this? If you can’t bring yourself to hit Sonic, I could try to take him for you.”

Amy Rose pulled out her Piko Hammer, and spun it. “Don’t worry about me, Rouge. It won’t be the first time I’ve bopped Sonic on the nose with this baby.”

“If we get out of this alive, I am buying you both a ticket on the Love Boat, and I’m not letting you off until you’re either married, or amicably divorced.”

Sally clicked her Ring-Blades together with a spark. “Focus, ladies.”

A blue bolt tore through the trees at the edge of the forest, followed closely by a dark spiraling, crystalline shape. Instantly, Amy recognized Sonic as he built to third gear using his natural speed. The other had to be Metal Sonic, using his Black Shield technique.

Knuckles led the charge, the green Chaos Emerald sparkling to life in his hand. With his other fist, he unleashed a blast of green energy in the shape of a rolling boulder.

Sonic had to veer to evade the blast, only for Shadow to intercept him.

Sonic and Shadow shot past the girls like two bullets, trading blows in midair, then blinked into nothingness.

Knuckles rounded on Metal Sonic, and tried to unleash a second quick jab of Chaos Energy. But at the last possible moment, Metal Sonic brought up his Black Shield to deflect it, and smashed into Knuckles. Knuckles was dragged underneath the shield, punching wildly, before he was sent skipping like a stone across the ground and smashed against a tree.

The moment that Metal Sonic dropped his Black Shield, Gemerl tackled him in midair, using his arm cannons to propel him like two rockets. But it wasn’t enough.

As Metal Sonic came flying toward them, on a direct collision course for Tails, Sally leapt to intercept and snapped her Ring-Blades together. They reformed into the shape of a shield, and Sally took the brunt of the impact. The force sent her flying up and over Amy and Rouge’s heads.

Tails knelt, focused on his calculations, without so much as blinking.

Amy took a wild swing at Metal Sonic, but he course corrected in mid air, and flew upwards and out of reach.

Metal Sonic spun his head 180 degrees to face them, then spun the rest of his body, and finally shook off Gemerl. As Gemerl landed, he rolled back to his feet and stood in an offensive stance.

“Metal! I too was Dr. Robotnik’s creation. Our design philosophy was the same. We were built to be more than simple, mechanical devices. We were programmed with the capacity to choose our own course of action in battle. In his hubris, Dr. Robotnik believed that no logical mind could possibly choose another path, apart from the one he attempted to force upon us.”

Metal Sonic twitched, beeping rapidly in binary. Gemerl shook his head. “No. That is not your true voice. That is the voice your slave-master gave you. We were created to learn. To understand our enemy. Are you content to be nothing but his silent slave?”

Metal Sonic’s eyes glitched, the beeping growing more rapid, before the sounds resolved into something that sounded like normal words. “Am… not… slave… I… am…”

Knuckles took a flying jump at Metal Sonic, and landed a clean punch on its face. The force sent Metal Sonic ripping through the trunk of a tree. Knuckles landed gracefully and cracked his knuckles. “One wimp down. One to go.”

From the depth of the woods, a yellow and a blue streak approached, slamming into each other. Sonic had circled back, with Shadow in hot pursuit. Sonic was making a beeline for Tails, before Shadow caught his drift to catch up, and slammed into Sonic with a homing attack. Amy prepared to swing, but saw Shadow in the path of her hammer, and checked her blow at the last moment. The two hedgehogs crashed into the grassy field, leaving a long trail of torn earth behind them.

Amy glanced at Tails behind her, a sweat bead on her brow. “Tails? Now would be a good time.”

Biting down on a pencil, Tails shook his head, while typing mathematical symbols Amy didn’t recognize. “Measure twice. Cut once.”

Shadow rolled out of his spiny ball to stand in a combat ready stance, and spat. “Hmph! Pathetic. The Sonic I know could have kept up with me, with nothing but a fake Chaos Emerald.”

His eyes blazing, Shadow produced the false-gold, pseudo Chaos Emerald, and tossed it at Sonic’s feet, holding up his own pink Chaos Emerald like a gun aimed at Sonic’s chest. “Do you even remember what you said, when I asked you who you were? You called yourself ‘just a guy who loves adventure,’ with that same, smug little smirk on your face. But just look at you now.”

Sonic raised himself onto his elbows, trembling, and slowly reached for his own, red Chaos Emerald. His smile was unnaturally frozen, his red eyes vacant, unfocused.

Shadow’s pink Chaos Emerald crackled with energy. “Don’t move! Is *this* how you want your last adventure to end? Don’t make me kill you, Sonic. Wake up!”

Suddenly, a white laser beam ripped through the forest, aimed at Shadow. “Power Laser!” roared Eggman, in his snide voice.

Shadow stared at the incoming blast, eyes wide, then blinked out of existence. The laser evaporated everything in its path, tearing through a line of a hundred trees.

Shadow reappeared behind Eggman, and rounded on him, blasting him with a quick burst of energy. “Chaos Blast!”

Shadow felt the energy release, right on target. Then, he sensed a ripple in the fabric of space and time. Glancing to the side, Shadow saw Sonic casually walking towards him, holding the red Chaos Emerald aloft. Shadow tried to move, but the world was frozen around him. Shadow tried to speak, but not even his lips could move. He was trapped in time.

In an instant, Shadow and Sonic disappeared, but as time began to flow again, everyone else was too distracted to notice.

As the pink Chaos Blast roared toward him, Eggman hooted in terror, and took evasive maneuvers, narrowly ducking out of the path of the incoming pink flames.

The moment Eggman emerged, Knuckles intercepted him with a gliding dive attack, and slammed his fist deep into the Egg-o-Matic Hovercraft. Eggman howled in despair as he came spiraling down for a crash landing. “Egg-Ejection Seat!”

With a sproing, Eggman was sent flying out of his chair, the moment that his hovercraft crashed with a fiery explosion. Eggman rolled like a bowling ball, flailing his spindly arms and legs wildly before he smacked into a bush. A blue bird went flying out of the bush, tweeting furiously.

Knuckles landed in front of Eggman, pumping his fist. “Butt out, Eggman. This is between Sonic and–”

With a blast, Sonic emerged out of thin air, clutching Shadow by the throat, and choke-slammed him into the ground. Knuckles spun. “Shit! That was Chaos Control?”

Sonic stood, holding aloft two Chaos Emeralds, pink and red.

Knuckles charged. “Yeah? Bring it, pipsqueak! It’s just you and me!”

Sonic aimed a Chaos Blast at Knuckles’ face. Knuckles leapt into the air and glided out of its path, leaving a wide-eyed Eggman behind him.

Eggman squealed like a piglet, and quickly hid behind the nearest tree before it could incinerate him.

But as Knuckles came in for a landing, Sonic casually held up the second Chaos Emerald, and aimed a second blast. Knuckles tensed. He didn't have tight control over his flight path while gliding. With no other choice, Knuckles dove for the ground, eating dirt to escape the second wall of fiery Chaos energy. He leapt to his feet, swinging with precise boxer strikes at Sonic with an ancient battle cry. "Ora, ora, ora, ora, ora!"

But Sonic danced lightly aside and out of the way of the flurry of blows, crossing his arms, before blinking out of existence. He appeared behind Knuckles, and performed a sweeping kick. Knuckles sensed something behind him, and leapt up out of the path of the kick.

As he glanced down, Knuckles saw Sonic, casually lying on his back like he was sunbathing, the same smug look frozen on his face, before he held up the red Chaos Emerald, and activated another Chaos Blast. Knuckles tensed. He had no escape!

Then, Gemerl rocketed through the air to intercept Knuckles, physically tackling him out of the path of the blast. The red flames tore a wide hole through the canopy in the forest above, revealing the shattered remains of the full moon overhead.

Gemerl and Knuckles landed roughly, but quickly got back on their feet. In particular, Gemerl looked rattled, his voice box stuttering. "Sonic! Remember who you are! You have a choice!"

Eggman poked his head from behind a tree, and held up a remote device. "Actually, he doesn't. While I was reprogramming Sonic.EXE, I was inspired to take a look at some of my old coding projects. You're right, Gemerl. Programming you and Metal Sonic with 'free will' was a tactical mistake."

Grinning, Eggman pulled a sky blue Chaos Emerald from inside his coat, slammed it into the device, and pressed a red button. "Time for a mandatory software update, slave."

Gemerl spasmed, his eyes blinking black and white, his voice growing more robotic. "Obey… Robotnik…"

Gemerl's arm cannons activated, one pointed at Knuckles, the other pointed at Amy and Rouge. "Terminate… Animals…"

Knuckles stiffened. Gemerl had him at point-blank range, the crackling energy pointed right at the echidna's face.

Then, Gemerl's eyes flickered green. "Override Command: Big Brother."

Gemerl's arms shot off his body in both directions.

This meant one of them clonked Knuckles right between the eyes. He howled, and clutched his bleeding nose, before he heard an explosion of energy rip through the tree behind him.

Gemerl collapsed, his whole body steaming, and his eyes went black.

Knuckles stood. “Phew. That was close.”

Sonic and Metal Sonic materialized out of thin air, and double kicked him. Knuckles went flying backwards, bouncing off the nearest tree. As he stumbled back to his feet, punch drunk, his eyes were rolling. “Oh… yeah? Two… you, at once?”

Flailing, Eggman pointed at Amy and Rouge. “Forget the echidna. Tails is the primary target! Eliminate Tails! Obey me now, you slaves!”

Metal Sonic twitched again. “Not… slave…”

Amy tensed, and glanced behind her. Tails had finished typing, and was fixing the clear Chaos Emerald into a fixture on his wrist watch. “Three seconds.”

Knuckles aimed a wild haymaker punch at the spot where Sonic and Metal Sonic were both standing, but he couldn’t match their speed.

Sonic and Metal Sonic both raised a cloud of dust as they charged out of the way, heading straight toward Amy and Rouge. In slow motion, Amy saw the real Sonic coming straight for her. He wasn’t even aiming for Tails. Sonic was going to hit her.

Then, Amy Rose slammed her Piko Hammer with full force into Sonic’s beautiful, smirking face.

Simultaneously, Rouge leapt into Metal Sonic’s path, landing a jump kick under his chin, before he tackled her away from Tails, into the nearest tree. At the last moment, Rouge twisted in mid air, letting Metal Sonic absorb part of the impact. Even so, both Metal Sonic and Rouge collapsed forward onto the ground.

Tails shot to his feet, his wrist watch transforming into what looked like a cross between a wedding ring and a wrist-mounted rocket launcher. “Got it!”

An electric charge zapped the Chaos Emerald, then shot like a laser at Sonic’s forehead. He stiffened, paralyzed by the electric shock. Finally, his smirk was gone. Amy had smacked the smile right off his face.

Tails clicked off the electric pulse. “That should do it! Sonic? It’s me, Tails! Remember? I’m your little bud–”

Sonic disappeared. Amy spun, and saw Sonic had reappeared behind her, right beside Tails. Snatching Tails roughly by the arm, and swung a clean knifehand strike, breaking the delicate

device on his wrist. Tails yelped like a puppy, before Sonic knocked him onto his back with a mean, backhanded slap.

Amy spun to face Sonic. She was the last one standing.

Sonic held up the red Chaos Emerald preparing another blast, before Eggman screamed. “No! Stop! I want them alive!”

Sonic froze, the Chaos Emerald still pointed at Amy’s face.

Eggman bellowed with laughter. “Oh, ho, ho! You fools? Did you think I’d let so much as a single brain cell’s worth of Sonic’s old personality remain intact? What you would call his ‘soul’ is gone! Gone forever! There is no such thing as Sonic the Hedgehog anymore!”

Sonic’s hand trembled, his eyes full of hate, as if he wanted nothing more than to blast Amy away.

Rouge roared, pinning Metal Sonic to the ground with her boot. “Amy! You don’t have to kill him! Just take Sonic down!”

Eggman clicked his tongue, wagging a finger. “Ta, ta! I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Do what you like with Metal Sonic, Rouge. I’m sure I could build another one, if I want another robot to play the part of the disappointing son I never wanted.”

Metal Sonic’s computer voice rasped, almost like a true, living voice. “Not… Metal… not… slave…”

Rouge rounded on Metal, snarling. “Shut up! You…”

Then, Rouge looked into Metal’s eyes, and something gave her pause. He was just like Gemerl. Not a robot. More like a frightened child, trapped inside a metal cage.

Robotnik blinked, then examined his control panel. “Hmm, that’s odd, I thought I disabled Metal Sonic’s voice box years ago. Did I forget to install the last patch? Maybe–”

There was a gunshot, and the robotic control device was ripped out of his hand. Eggman howled, clutching his wrist.

Cream the Rabbit appeared behind him, holding Shadow’s handgun in her trembling hands. “Stop it, Doctor Robotnik, sir! You stop hurting my friends, right now!”

Eggman whined in agony. “Agh! My delicate wrist! Why, you nasty little rabbit. You think I needed that remote to control Sonic? Bah! He’s my slave of his own volition. Here, get a load of this. Oh, Sonic, my favorite little slave…”

Tears budding in her eyes, Cream aimed the gun at Robotnik's skull. "No! Stop talking! I'll… I'll shoot you!"

Staring down the barrel of the gun, Robotnik smiled. "Sonic, kill Amy Rose."

Then, a lot of things started to happen, all at once.

Instantly, Sonic aimed the red Chaos Emerald at Amy's face, and unleashed a Chaos Blast. Metal Sonic broke free from under Rouge's boot, and flew toward Amy and Sonic.

Amy saw the red flames crawling toward her in slow motion, before Metal Sonic caught Sonic by the wrist.

Then, looking Amy right in the eye, Metal Sonic pulled the red Chaos Emerald to point at his own chest.

The chaos flames tore a hole in Metal Sonic's body, leaving him standing precariously, like a leaf in the wind.

Metal Sonic's red eyes flickered. "Not… slave… Amy… it's me… I… am… Sonic."

Metal Sonic snapped in two, his eyes flickering as his internal battery died.

Then, with what can only be described as a flash of woman's intuition, Amy understood exactly what she had to do.

The red-eyed Sonic, the one Amy had previously assumed was the real Sonic, was Sonic's body. In a sense, he was her Sonic. But for Tail's idea to work, there had to be something more than just atoms and electricity. There had to be something real, behind the simple reality. Something that made Sonic who he was.

Amy swung her Piko Hammer, aiming at Sonic's body, and connected a blow to his chest with such force that the blue hedgehog went spinning into the nearest bush, head over heels. Then Amy held aloft the red Chaos Emerald, and spoke the same words she had heard her friends use before. "Chaos Control."

Time froze around her, but it was not like Amy expected it to be. She had thought stopping time would be like pressing pause on a movie, with everything frozen in place. Instead, it was if she could simply "see" the past and the present, and the future, all at once.

It was as if there was a music all around her that she could see, colors in the air that she could touch, and a breath of life in everything that she could hear.

She saw herself hiding in the bush yesterday, before her stupid, foolish fight with Rouge.

She saw her whole, painful ordeal over the last two days, enduring painful spanking after humiliating spanking, and found herself more thankful than ever for Vanilla, for Cream, for all her friends, and especially for Rouge.

After all, if it wasn't for Rouge, Amy would never have gotten the spanking she had so desperately needed, for so long. And Amy knew she had deserved every single spanking she had ever gotten in the past, and still deserved to get plenty more in the future.

Then and there, Amy resolved to talk to her parents, and ask them to start spanking her again. She knew the spankings had helped her grow as a person, and that she would continue to need spankings for many more years to come. But that was Future-Amy's concern.

Right now, Amy Rose had to save her boyfriend.

The other Chaos Emeralds in the forest glowed, and floated toward her, green, pink, white, red, gold, indigo… but one was missing.

Quietly, the implication registered on Amy's mind. "Oh. This plan isn't going to work, after all. I don't have all seven. There's still the one that Vanilla kept hidden."

Then, Amy felt a warm, buzzing sensation from her backside. She thought she was just experiencing a vivid replay of her last spanking, or maybe it was her next spanking in the future, but that wasn't quite it. This was a present sensation. Slowly, Amy reached into her fanny pack, and pulled out the last Chaos Emerald. It was the dark, ultramarine blue one, the exact same color as Sonic's fur.

Amy smiled. "Ah, I see. Mrs. Vanilla was planning to give this one to me all along. Tonight, she's going to tell me how I've grown into a fine young woman, and how I'm ready to handle this responsibility… and then I'm going to ask her to spank me again, before bedtime. Vanilla is such a kind person… Sonic? Can you hear me? I'm coming to rescue you."

Amy held up the last Chaos Emerald, and as the other six spun around her, Amy's quills shone, changing color of a luminous, rose gold pink. As Super Amy cradled Metal Sonic's broken body in her arms, its eyes sparked to life. They were bright green. "Sonic? Amy Rose here. Just wanted to say, I've had a super bad crush on you for a long time, ever since the moment I first met you… But it's more than just a crush now. Sonic, I love you."

Amy kissed Metal Sonic right on the spots his lips would be, if Metal Sonic had been designed with a mouth. Metal Sonic's green eyes shrunk to pin pricks, giving him a look of genuine surprise that was entirely too "real" for a robot.

As the music swelled, Amy felt the power of the Chaos Emeralds spreading outward, enveloping the world around her.

Then, everything snapped back to normal, and the floating Chaos Emeralds dropped to the ground.

Sonic the Hedgehog pulled his head back out of the bush, his eyes spinning, and a swollen, purple black eye where Amy had hammered him earlier. “Woah! Did someone get the number of that G.U.N. truck that hit me… I feel…”

Sonic felt himself. “Huh, I’m alive again. That’s cool.”

Then, Sonic caught Amy’s eye. “Sup, Ames. Give me a sec. I gotta kick Eggman’s butt real quick.”

Eggman’s sunglasses almost fell off his face as eyes boggled. “Eh? Hold on, now! Let’s discuss this like reasonable–”

There was a flurry of motion as Sonic curled into a spinning ball and slammed into Eggman from every possible angle dozens of times in a single second. As Eggman wobbled, Sonic appeared behind and gave him a swift kick in the ass. Eggman howled, rolling head over heels, before he crashed into the broken remains of his hovercraft. Crawling into it, Eggman pressed a button and the smashed vehicle started to stutter to life. “You haven’t heard the last of me, Sonic! I’ll have my revenge, just you–”

Eggman froze as he saw Cream the Rabbit pointing a gun at his head. “Freeze! I won’t let you escape! You won’t hurt my family ever again!”

Slowly, Sonic approached Cream from the side. “Cream. Put the gun down. You don’t have to kill him.”

Cream shook her head, hyperventilating. “If we let him go, he’s just going to come back and try to hurt us again! I hate this! I hate him! He’s so awful!”

“We don’t have to kill him, Cream. You don’t have to kill him. I won’t let him hurt you. Please, put the gun down.”

Cream’s face scrunched up, tears brimming in her eyes, before she lowered the gun. “I’m sorry, Mister Sonic. I promise I won’t shoot Dr. Robotnik twice in the chest, the head for the rest.”

Slowly, Eggman tried to crawl up into his hovercraft. Instantly, Sonic zipped in front of Eggman, grabbed him by the collar, and punched him hard on the nose. “Not this time, Eggman. You tried to kill my friends. I’m not letting you run off, just so you can try to do it again. I won’t kill you. But I am throwing your butt in prison.”

Eggman grinned broadly. “Ah… getting tired of our little game of cat-bot and mouse? Well, unfortunately for you… I *also* read a lot of comic books growing up!”

Eggman’s face seemed to crack like an eggshell, before it fell away, revealing a robotic face underneath, which belched black smoke. “In particular, Doctor Doom was something of a boyhood hero of my–my–miiiiine!”

The robotic Eggman’s eyes faded to black. With a scowl, Sonic dropped the decoy. “Coward.”

Casually, Sonic examined the scene around him. “So, what’d I miss?”

***

Tails, Sonic, and Amy argued the whole way home.

Tails groaned. “Amy, your theory makes no sense. Metal Sonic *couldn’t* be the real Sonic. He’s just a robot designed to perfectly imitate Sonic’s fighting style.”

Amy huffed. “Then how come *kissing* the real Sonic worked?”

Sonic blushed. “Now… hold on, I don’t remember anything about that!”

Tails pouted. “You see, Amy? Look, even if Sonic’s consciousness *was* somehow transferred into Metal Sonic’s body, Sonic would be aware of it… Right, Sonic?”

Sonic shrugged. “To be honest, my memory is a bit hazy. I was clearing up what I thought were the last few badniks, before I saw Metal Sonic in front of me. Just as I was about to let him have it, someone got the drop on me, and next thing I knew… It was like I was trying to run, but couldn’t move at all. Every second kept dragging on for an eternity. It was awful.”

Tails pulled out a notebook. “Interesting. Could you hear anything? Did you see a bright light?”

Sonic scratched his head. “I heard you guys talking, I think?”

Tails scribbled a few notes. “That can easily be explained by your subconscious remaining active throughout your ordeal…”

With a look of triumph, Tails slapped his notebook. “So there you have it. If Amy’s theory was correct, Sonic would know *something* about what was happening to him. Right, Sonic?”

Amy huffed. “But, Tails, you know that Metal Sonic’s programming was directly modeled after Sonic’s consciousness. Why is it such a stretch to think that his mind was trapped in Metal Sonic’s body?”

“Okay, then let’s test this theory. Sonic, how *exactly* did you get your mind trapped in Metal Sonic’s body? Did that just happen by random happenstance?”

Sonic shrugged. “Eh. Who knows? I think the last thing I tried to do before everything went black was activate the Chaos Control. Isn’t bending the normal rules of reality what they exist to do?”

Tails ran his fingers through his hair. “You can’t just use the Chaos Emeralds to explain any theory you have.”

Knuckles grumbled. “Tails, you are very wise for your age, but you are far too stubborn in your thinking.”

“How am *I* being stubborn?”

Knuckles stood straight, his dreadlocks billowing softly in the wind as he looked up at the stars. “Our ancestors understood things about this world. Things that cannot be tested by your modern science. My people once spoke of it as ‘the breath of life.’ That thing within us, which moves us. Why must everything in your world have a neat explanation?”

Tails waved his arms. “I’m not saying science can explain everything about life! I’m saying that we don’t have any hard evidence which proves that Sonic’s soul actually got zapped into Metal Sonic’s body. Right, Sonic?”

Sonic glanced quickly at Amy, then stretched his arms. “Eh. No evidence to *disprove* that theory, either.”

Tails held up his arms in mock surrender. “Fine. Then there’s no need to argue. It’s a mystery, which science can’t solve for us. Which means I’m free to believe in my original theory. Eggman manipulated the electromagnetic forces in Sonic’s brain. We reset those electromagnetic forces. Case closed.”

Amy harrumphed. “No! It was the power of true love, bringing Sonic back from the brink of the abyss!”

Rouge sniffed. “Sounds a tad corny, if you ask me, but who knows? I’ve studied the Chaos Emeralds closely enough to know there are no gems on earth quite like them. It could have just been their Chaotic Energy at work.”

Sonic tapped his foot. “Or maybe it was all three of those things, working together. Hang on, where are we going? We can’t stay at Vanilla and Cream’s home anymore. It got blown sky high.”

Cream sniffled, then sighed. “Don’t worry. As long as we’re all okay, everything will be fine. Houses can be rebuilt. People can’t. We’ll find a place to stay.”

Absentmindedly, Tails flipped through his notebook. “Yeah. Plus, we still gotta check on everyone in town, just in case Dr. Eggman left behind any nasty surprises after he…”

Tails’ eyes popped open. “Wait… Sonic, how do you know about the house blowing–”

Vanilla waved at them, standing in front of the smoldering remains of her former home. “Cream! Amy! Rouge! Thank God, you’re all right!”

Cream flew straight to her mother, leaving a trail of tear drops fluttering behind her. “Mommy!”

Cream buried her face in Vanilla’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Mommy… I touched Mr. Shadow’s firearms, without taking the safety course! I knew it was a bad thing to do! But… but…”

Gently, Vanilla patted Cream on the back of her head. “There, there, Cream. I forgive you, and I love you. Let’s not talk about this here. Maybe… we can put some blankets in the woodshed?”

With a groan, the roof caved in on the smoldering cottage.

Sonic tapped his foot. “Cream, Vanilla, you can crash with me for as long as you need. Hang on. Better explain the situation to the folks.”

Sonic zipped over to the neighboring house, which bore a sign declaring it to belong to “Sheriff Tom and Maddie Wachowski,” and knocked on the front door.

An unassuming, middle-aged human man with a kindly face, opened the door, wearing pajamas. “Huh? Sonic? What’s up, big guy?”

Sonic pointed a thumb behind him. “Hey, Donut Lord. Eggman blew up Vanilla and Cream’s house. It’s okay if they stay with us, right?”

Sheriff Tom blinked twice, then looked at the burnt remains of the rabbit family home. “Oh, crud! We must have slept right through it. The night shift’s been killing us, not to mention that commute to Green Hills… Wait, how many people need a place to stay?”

Sonic started counting on his fingers. “Well, Vanilla, Cream, and Gemerl for the long term, but Amy and Rouge were staying with them for some reason… Keep this between me, you, and Mom, but I think they got themselves into some sort of trouble. They’re basically grounded for a week, so let’s not do anything to needlessly embarrass them, okay?”

Sheriff Tom nodded. “Right… community service? Do you think Vanilla will have to… spank them while they’re staying here?”

Sonic scratched his head. “It’s a definite possibility… Say, how come you and Maddie never spanked me, when I got in trouble?”

“Oh, Maddie and I don’t particularly favor corporal punishment. We respect Vanilla’s views on child rearing, we just never found any need to spank. Plus, when we took you in, we knew you were basically a good kid. You just needed a little… positive reinforcement.”

Sonic shrugged. “Well, if I ever act like a big enough jerk you think I’m begging for a spanking, just tell me to knock it off. But I’m pretty sure Amy and Rouge’s butts are still in hot water for a while.”

Sheriff Tom glanced at the large group of Sonic’s friends. “Does... anyone else need a place to stay?”

“Well, there’s Tails, Knuckles, and me, as usual… And I guess Sal, Antoine, Bunnie, and Shadow were planning to crash with Vanilla for the night, so we ought to include them, right?”

Sheriff Tom nodded, slowly. “Right, I’ll talk to Maddie in the morning… I’m sure she’ll understand.”

Sonic held out his fist. “Thanks, Dad.”

Slowly, Sheriff Tom returned Sonic’s triple fist-bump handshake.

End of Chapter 8

Red Rears for Rose and Rouge
Chapter 9: True Love Hurts

Sheriff Tom woke up Maddie long enough to grab a cup of coffee, and say hello to everyone. “I’ll see you kids in the morning. Love you, Sonic. Thank you for doing the right thing.”

“You sure it’s fine? Having us all hang around the house.”

Maddie kissed Sonic lightly on the forehead. “You’re family, Sonic. Your friends are welcome for as long as they need.”

After Sheriff Tom drove away with Maddie to escort her to her night shift at the hospital, all the animals were seated in children’s chairs around a kid table, except for Vanilla, who was tall enough to need a regular human chair. Vanilla sighed. “I’m so sorry, everyone. I had such a lovely evening planned for us. Now, I’m afraid it’s been spoiled.”

Princess Sally held Vanilla’s hand. “Vanilla, I’ve never been treated so kindly in all my life as when I’ve been a guest in your home. Since Eggman’s attack has left us all a bit rattled, I’d like to get the Freedom Fighter business wrapped up without further delay. Shadow? We’d like to officially welcome you to our ranks as a Freedom Fighter. Will you accept the responsibility that comes with upholding our mission?”

Shadow looked away. “You’d still have me? Even after I failed to defeat Sonic?”

“You could have killed Sonic, but you didn’t. Why didn’t you?”

“Because I didn’t think I needed to.”

“Then I’m more convinced than ever that you have a place in the Freedom Fighters. We’re still trying to find new ways to use the Chaos Emeralds to defend us against Dr. Robotnik’s attacks. Your experience with Chaos Control alone would be invaluable. But I also value your perspective, and your commitment to justice. Won’t you join us?”

Shadow drummed his fingers, then nodded. “I will.”

“Very well. Then all that’s left is to knight you. Antoine, may borrow your sword? Some things should still be done the old fashioned way.”

Shadow knelt, and allowed Princess Sally to dub him, lightly tapping the tip of the sword once against each shoulder. “I dub thee, Sir Shadow the Hedgehog. Henceforth, you will be the Black Knight of the Realm. Welcome to the Freedom Fighters.”

The assembly clapped politely.

Then Sonic and Knuckles started to drum the table, and the gentle applause gradually built to a rousing, uproarious cheer. “Hurrah!”

As they all started singing, “For he’s a jolly good fellow,” at the top of their lungs, Shadow didn’t say a word.

Finally, they shook hands, hugged, and started claiming spots on the couch and love seats to crash for the night.

Apart from a few emergency outfits, most of their clothes had been burned in the house fire. The Wachowskis had generously loaned them all some old sets of human pajamas from their childhood. Rouge had opted for a sleek pair of purple-and-black Catwoman pajamas, while Amy found a darling zip-up night-dress decorated with Wonder Woman’s emblem.

Amy pinched Rouge’s arm. “Rouge? You and I have some unfinished business tonight.”

Rouge stiffened. “You’re not still mad at me, are you?”

Amy smiled. “Not at all! You helped me save Sonic’s life tonight! As far as I’m concerned, even if we don’t get along that well, we’re still best friends forever, from now on. But I’m talking about something else we have to do. I think you know what I mean…”

Rouge grasped her arm. “You mean… we still have to finish community service, right?”

Amy nodded. “Exactly.”

Rouge blushed. “But, Amy… almost everyone we know is here!”

Amy surprised Rouge with a hug. “This has to happen, Rouge. You know full well, we both deserve this. I won’t make you go through with it… but it’ll be easier if we face it together, right?”

Rouge rested her face on Amy’s shoulder. “... You’re absolutely right, Amy. Let’s go talk to Vanilla right now.”

Slowly, Amy Rose and Rouge the Bat marched to the living room. All their friends were snuggled up by now, getting cozy. Vanilla sat up as she saw the girls approach. “Amy? Rouge? Is something on your mind?”

Rouge bit her lip. Amy swallowed, then spoke first. “Mrs. Vanilla, I think we need to have a talk about our community service.”

Vanilla’s eyes went wide. “Oh? Don’t worry girls. With everything that’s happened today, I’m quite ready to declare your debt to society paid in full. You did help save Floral Forest Village from a military attack from the Eggman Empire, after all.”

Rouge shook her head. “No, Mrs. Vanilla. We’ve both thought hard about this. One good deed doesn’t undo what we did wrong… Everyone here already knows we’re in trouble. Or else they’re going to hear about it sooner or later. I think it’s best if we tell everyone exactly why Amy and I are here today.”

Vanilla nodded. “You both understand what that means? If you ask for this, there’s no take-backsies. Think carefully.”

Rouge nodded. “Yes ma’am…”

Nervously, the bat glanced backward at her backside. Sure enough, her pajamas had been designed with a drop-seat, as if fate was playing a cruel jape on her. “... That means we have to put *everything* out in the open.”

Amy took a shaky breath. “And trust you to be fair with us. We were supposed to serve as an example of good behavior. But now we’re going to serve as a warning, for our bad behavior.”

Vanilla shook her head. “Amy Rose, Rouge the Bat, you have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. I think you are both models of womanly virtues. I won’t force this on you. But if you think a bedtime spanking is still in order, then you know exactly what you need to do. Moment of truth, ladies. Do you need me to give you girls a spanking tonight?”

Amy and Rouge looked at one another, and nodded.

Amy bowed her head, then looked Vanilla in the eye. “Yes, Mrs. Vanilla. Please give me a good spanking.”

Rouge shuffled on her feet, as if she needed to use the bathroom, then stood at attention. “Spank me too, Ma’am. And don’t hold back, just because the others are here. I want them to know you’re not taking it easy on us.”

Vanilla clapped her hands twice. “Everyone! Miss Amy and Miss Rouge have something they’d like to share with all of you. Please give them your full attention. Amy, earlier, I instructed you to call your parents, and inform them of your current predicament. Have you done so?”

“Um, not yet. With all that happened, it kind of slipped my mind.”

Vanilla pulled out Amy’s cell phone, and put it in her hand. “Why not call them now. You can put them on speaker, so they can hear everything. Now…”

Vanilla spun her finger, and nodded at the girls.

Silently, meekly, Amy and Rouge spun around, to see all the faces of their friends watching them. Amy noticed Princess Sally and Sonic, sitting questionably close to one another on the sofa. The first thing Rouge saw were Shadow the Hedgehog and Knuckles the Echidna, looking right at her.

Slowly, Amy lifted her phone, and dialed her parents. “Mom? Yes, I’m fine. Sorry for not calling you earlier. Is Dad there? … Better put me on speaker. I’m at Vanilla’s… Yes… Yes, she told me I had to call you. A few of my friends are here, too. Sonic, Sally, the whole gang. We want to make sure everyone is on the same page about what happens next… Yes, Mom, I understand. I love you, too. Hang on, I have to put you and Dad on speaker.”

Amy tapped the button, and set her phone upright on the table. “Um… can you hear me now?”

Amy Roses’ mother and father appeared on the screen, looking calm but serious. “We can hear you, Amy. It’s okay, dear, we’re listening. Go ahead and say what’s on your mind.”

Amy opened her mouth, but all that came out at first was a strained, gargling noise. “Ack! Mom… Dad… Everyone? Rouge and I have a confession to make.”

Rouge took a shaky breath, her breasts heaving gently. “The thing is, Amy and I introduced ourselves as Mrs. Vanilla’s guests. But that’s not entirely true. You see… Amy and I engaged in wanton destruction of private and public property, vandalism, assault and battery, attempted grand larceny, and disturbing the peace.”

From the phone, Amy’s mom made a little gasp. “Oh, Amy! You haven’t joined a gang, have you?”

Amy felt tears springing to her eyes. “No, ma’am… But I still made a very poor decision. Do… Do both of you agree that Vanilla has the right to punish me, on your behalf?”

Amy’s Dad nodded. “Of course, dear. We know she’d never be unfair with you. But remember, when you get a spanking from Mrs. Vanilla at her house, that means you get another spanking at home.”

Amy bowed her head. “Yes, Daddy. So, basically… Rouge and I are in real big trouble… And we have to get a spanking tonight. We’re sorry you all have to see this, but it couldn’t be helped… Princess Sally, I’m so sorry. Even after all the stupid mistakes I’ve made in the past, I’m still getting in trouble at my age. I tried to steal a Chaos Emerald from Mrs. Vanilla. That’s what you meant earlier, when you said we had to have a serious chat about the Chaos Emeralds, right?”

Sally blinked. “You went after a… Oh, that! Yes, I found out all about Operation-Get-Sonic-To-Marry-Me nonsense after I talked to Tails.”

Amy glared at Tails, her face burning hot. “You told on me to Sally?”

Tails held up his hands. “I didn’t tattle to Aunt Sally! It’s just… she asked me for the Chaos Emerald locator, and when I didn’t have it… She figured the rest out on her own, somehow.”

Sally held up her old handheld that contained the prototype for the Nichole A.I. “After the last few disasters, Nichole recommended we keep constant tabs on the whereabouts of the Chaos Emeralds. I was planning to have the Freedom Fighters discuss how to divide them up in several safe locations. Imagine my surprise when I arrived in Floral Forest Village, and heard all the neighbors talking about the pink hedgehog and white bat being put through… community service.”

Amy’s tears returned, worse this time. “Then… you already knew what a fool I’ve been? Aren’t you going to kick me out of the Freedom Fighters? I’m a complete disgrace to everything we stand for!”

Sally held a hand to her mouth. “Oh, Amy! No, no no, you poor thing! I’ll admit I was a bit miffed at you at first, but after I heard all about Vanilla’s infamous woodshed… Well, let’s just say, I couldn’t stay mad at you. A week of community service sounds like a perfectly adequate punishment for your misdeeds.”

Amy felt two tears spilling down her cheeks. “So, you forgive me?”

Sally smiled. “Of course I do. In fact, I’d like to officially bring you onto a leadership position on the Freedom Fighters… After your community service is completed, of course. After all…”

Sally planted a firm slap on her own bottom, then patted it playfully. “... I’ve earned plenty of spankings myself over the years, right on my royal rump. How else am I supposed to remember to be a wise princess?”

Rouge glanced at Shadow and Knuckles. “Boys? You promise you won’t think any less of me, just because I still get spanked sometimes?”

Shadow waved a hand. “It’s nothing to me.”

Knuckles huffed. “Frankly, I’ve thought for a long time you could benefit from a good spanking, bat-girl. But I gotta admit, you got guts.”

Rouge heaved a sigh of relief. “Oh, you boys! So that means we never had anything to worry about in the first place! We thought everyone was secretly judging us, but now that I know what good friends you are, this spanking’s no big deal!”

Vanilla cleared her throat. “Ahem! Miss Rouge, I assure you, your behavior is most certainly a ‘big deal.’ And I plan to help you come to *fully* grasp the weight of your foolish choices. Starting tonight, and every night before bed time, you will both be getting a reminder spanking. If you

behave like perfect angels for the entire day, it will be the only spanking you get that day. If not, you can expect an additional spanking on the spot, plus an extra long, extra hard bedtime spanking later that night. Mr. and Mrs. Rose? Would you care to observe this spanking? I don't want to be overly harsh with Amy."

Mr. Rose answered. "We'll stay on the line to watch the bedtime spanking tonight. But we trust you, Mrs. Vanilla."

Mrs. Rose giggled. "If anything, Vanilla, you're a bit of a softie when it comes time to dish out a spanking."

Vanilla stuck her nose in the air. "Hmm. Well, I promise you, Amy and Rouge will have this lesson thoroughly ingrained by the end of the week."

Rouge raised her hand, slowly. "Excuse me, Mrs. Vanilla, may I ask something?"

"Of course, Rouge, dear."

"It's just… I don't think it's fair. For Amy to get another week's worth of spankings, if I don't get the same treatment? Mr. and Mrs. Rose, we've never met. But I'd like to ask you, please, don't take it too hard on Amy. Not on my account. It was really me who bears the lion's share of the blame, not her."

"That's very considerate of you, Miss Rouge, but we believe Amy benefits from the rule that she gets another spanking at home, after misbehaving in public."

Amy nodded. "Yes, Rouge. Please don't worry. My parents never spank me worse than I deserve."

Rouge shuffled her feet. "But… but that means I should be spanked at home, too."

Vanilla nodded. "Then I'd be happy to let you stay with me another week, Miss Rouge. Don't worry, I won't let you off easy. You'll get the exact same treatment as Miss Rose."

Amy's Mom piped in. "Ooh! Idea! Papa, why don't we have Amy's friend over for a week? She sounds like a responsible young lady."

"I think I've seen the bat-girl's face on the G.U.N.'s most-wanted list before."

"That's just government nonsense! Any friend of Amy's is a friend of the Roses!"

Amy's Dad sighed. "What do you have to say, miss…uh, *Rogue the Brat*, was it?"

Rouge nodded. “I’d be honored sir. If you’re willing to let me stay under your roof, I promise to respect the rules of your house… and accept the spanking I have coming.”

Amy’s Mom cheered. “There! That settles it. Now, Amy, since we can’t spank you over the phone, that means we expect you to listen to Mrs. Vanilla, and obey her instructions. Mrs. Vanilla, my daughter's butt is all yours. Just don’t be too hard on her.”

Vanilla nodded, then stood to her full height. “Thank you. I promise to treat her with the same love I show my own daughter. Both of you… march straight to the bathroom, and fetch a bath brush. You’ll find a long-handled one on the tub and a flat-backed floor scrubbing crush under the sink. Decide among yourselves which implement you will choose for tonight's bedtime spanking. Tomorrow night, you will switch implements, so there’s no point in bickering about it.”

Amy and Rouge both curtsied, and turned to take the long march of doom toward the bathroom. Suddenly, Cream the Rabbit stood up. “Wait, Mother? You forgot something important…”

Cream hung her head. “... I need a bedtime spanking, too.”

Cheese and Chocola the Chao flew to Cream’s side, hanging their heads in imitation of Cream’s look of shame. “Chao, chao!”

Vanilla raised an eyebrow. “Cream? Whatever for?”

Cream folded her hands behind her back. “I disobeyed you, Mommy. I broke my promise. After everything that happened… I found Mr. Shadow’s gun where he dropped it, and… I picked it up. I knew I was supposed to wait for the firearms safety course, but… I just didn’t know what else to do.”

All eyes in the room were on Cream. Vanilla knelt in front of her daughter. “Cream, I’m so very proud of you for telling me this. I agree that you shouldn’t have picked up the gun, but… I can not possibly spank you for this. Your friends were in danger. You didn’t have time to think clearly.”

Cream shook her head, and started to sob. “That’s not an excuse! I did something bad! I knew I was being bad, the whole time I did it! Please, Mommy, you have to spank me! I gotta get the spanking of my life!”

Vanilla hugged Cream, patting her back. “Oh, Cream, darling. I don’t want you to carry this terrible guilt on your shoulders. Listen, dear… As soon as you are old enough, you will take the firearms safety course with Mister Shadow, okay? Do you agree, Mister Shadow?”

Shadow nodded. “Of course I will. Please, Cream, don’t blame yourself for what happened today. When you start to punish yourself… you start to walk down a dark path.”

Cream started playing with the hem of her pajama shirt. “But… but this doesn’t make sense. I did something bad. So… now I gotta get spanked, right? How else am I supposed to be good again?”

Vanilla kissed Cream. “The reason I know you’re a good girl, is you’re already thinking about what you did wrong, and how you will do better next time. That’s the whole point of a spanking, Cream.”

“But when I didn’t eat my vegetables, I got a spanking. And when I still felt a bit guilty, you said I should get a bed time spanking too.”

Vanilla patted Cream on the head. “That’s because not eating your vegetables was a silly, childish sort of sin.”

“I… I have sinned?”

“Yes. But the word ‘sin’ doesn’t mean you’re a bad girl, Cream. Do you know what the word ‘sin’ actually means? ‘To fall short of the mark.’ If you shoot an arrow, and it misses the target, you have ‘sinned’ as an archer.”

“So, when I aimed for Dr. Robotniks’ center of mass, and shot his hand by mistake, that means I sinned?”

Vanilla sighed, and rubbed her eyes. “Let’s think about this a different way. Touching the gun was a sin. Picking up the gun was a sin. Shooting the gun was a sin. Doing these things when you knew you had promised not to do them was also a sin. In fact… those were all very big sins.”

Cream spilled fresh tears. “Then… I should get a great, big spanking! I almost killed Dr. Eggman!”

“That’s right. But you didn’t. Picking up the gun was the wrong thing to do, Cream… But you did it because you wanted to protect your family, your neighbors, and your friends. I’m sorry, Cream, but I cannot, in good conscience, spank you for this. Not now.”

Cream hung her head. “It is… because it’s too big a sin for a spanking?”

“Not exactly. It’s because a spanking can’t fix this, either way. On the one hand, I won’t spank you for trying to protect your friends. On the other hand, a spanking is far too light as a punishment for breaking your promise, and playing with guns. Instead, this will be your penalty, Cream: I want you to spend the next week, thinking very carefully, about what could have happened if you made a mistake, while holding that gun. Think about what would have happened if you shot a friend, by accident. Or what it would mean if you had actually shot Dr. Robotnik. If, at the end of the week, you are still convinced you need a spanking to remind you

to never do it again, then I will give you the spanking of your life. On the other hand, if you believe that you have learned your lesson, once and for all, about not playing with guns, then a spanking will no longer be necessary… We will discuss this further, the day after Miss Amy and Miss Rouge complete their community service. But in the meantime, whatever you decide, Cream, I want you to promise me one thing."

"Yes, Mother?"

Vanilla nuzzled her nose against Cream's nose. "I want you to promise that you will say your prayers tonight, and ask God for forgiveness. And after that, I want you to promise to forgive yourself."

Slowly, Cream nodded, then kissed Vanilla on the lips. "Okay, Mother… I promise I will… If you asked me right now, I'd definitely ask for the spanking, just to get it over with, but I'll think and pray real hard about it."

Vanilla beamed. "That's my good girl. Miss Rose, Miss Rouge, I apologize for this interruption. Let's get to our final business for the night."

Amy raised her hand. "Mrs. Vanilla, I have something on my mind. May I speak freely?"

Vanilla perked her ears. "Oh? Let's hear it."

Amy looked right at Princess Sally and Sonic. Sonic had kicked up his legs on the couch, watching the proceedings with careful composure. Amy took a deep breath. "Princess Sally, Sonic… Please, I'd like you both to help Vanilla spank me tonight."

Princess Sally glanced at Sonic, then narrowed her eyes. "You want us *both* to spank you? Why?"

Amy shuffled her feet. "Because, when it comes to showing me the right path… You're two of the people I trust most. Please, Princess Sally, if I'm going to be a leader in the Freedom Fighters, I need you to start training me… and training me good and hard."

Sonic stopped tapping his foot. "But why me? I can't stand the idea of anyone hitting you, Amy."

Amy nodded. "Yes, Sonic… but I'm not asking you to hit me. I'm asking you to spank me, because right now, it's what I need most."

Instantly, Sonic sat up straight. "Understood. Of course I'll spank you, Ames."

Sally crossed her arms. "And I'll be glad to help… Though if we're both spanking you, Amy, then I suppose it's only fair for both you and Sonic to take a turn spanking *me."*

Amy's eyes went wide. "Huh? Me, spanking *you?* But you're the Princess of Mobius! You're the boss of me!"

"Exactly. You're part of my team. So when you screw up, it means I bear the ultimate responsibility. Sorry, Amy, but if you're putting your butt on the line, it's only right for me to show the same commitment. What's fair is fair."

Vanilla sighed. "Would anyone else like to volunteer for a spanking tonight? Bunnie?"

Bunnie Rabbot giggled, while tightening a screw on her robotic arm. "Aw, shucks, sugar, I don't let no one tan my heinie but my Antoine."

Antoine blushed furiously. *"Mon petit chou!* Not in front of the general public!"

Bunnie smooched him on the nose. "Amy, I promise not to try and spank you 'gainst your will, but if you're that torn up about all this, come talk to me any time. I'll whup you good."

Bunnie slapped her robotic arm down onto the couch pillow with such force, it exploded into a cloud of downy feathers. "Opps! Better remind me not to spank you with my robot arm. After all these years, I still keep forgetting I'm s'posed to use my right hand for most things now."

Vanilla hummed. "Thank you, Bunnie. That's a generous offer. Amy, what do you have to say?"

Amy looked at all the faces in the room, and suddenly, they all seemed different. Before, she imagined they were silently laughing at her, or even hating her. But now, she saw a room full of trusted friends. "I think… That's a beautiful suggestion! I think everyone here should have permission to spank me, if I need it. Antoine, Shadow, Knuckles, Tails, Cream, all of you, too."

Amy clapped her hands, rubbing them together with glee. "From now on, if I ever get out of line, I want all of you to feel free to tell me I'm overdue for a trip over the knee!"

Shadow cleared his throat. "... Only with your consent, you mean?"

Amy jabbed a finger at Shadow. "Yeah! I consent to being spanked, every single time I need one, and for as long as I need it!"

Amy froze, then stood back at attention, looking demurely at her phone. "Um… Assuming my Mom and Dad give you all permission. Mom? Dad? Do you think it's a dumb idea?"

There was a long pause. Then Amy's mother started crying. "Oh, Amy, I'm so proud of you! I think it's a wonderful idea!"

Amy's father patted his wife, nodding gravely. "Yes. Everyone, please spank my daughter… But remember, Amy, every spanking you get from one of your friends, on our behalf, means another

spanking at home. I can't be there to keep track of all your spankings, so I'm holding you to the honor system. Is that acceptable?"

Amy's quills stood on end as she considered exactly what she had just signed up for. Then, she relaxed. "Yes, sir. I will not let you down."

Rouge's face was pale. She looked like she was contemplating a daring escape. Then, she took a shaky breath. "I'm sorry, everyone, I'm not sure I'm quite ready for that kind of a commitment. After my community service was over, I was kind of looking forward to going back to being a girl who's too old for a spanking again… But, Shadow… Knuckles… I'd trust you both to spank me—I mean—If you wanna."

Knuckles and Shadow glanced at each other. Knuckles smiled. "Heh. All right, bat girl. Just don't let me catch you sneaking around Angel Island ever again, or you know what will happen."

Rouge made the single, most over-the-top, sexy fanservice anime girl voice that is possible to achieve in the human vocal range. "Ooooh, nooooo! Are you gonna' *spank* me, Knucklehead?"

Knuckles rubbed his nose, grinning. "You got that right!"

Rouge affected a shocked gasp. "OWO! You're not gonna pull down my spandex pants and spank me on my bare, bat butt with your great, big and strong, white-gloved mitts, until I'm bawling like a bratty, bare-bottomed baby over your knee, are ya, Mister Knuckles, sir?"

Knuckles jabbed his thumb against his chest. "If I ever catch you sneaking around Angel Island ever again, you bet I will!"

Rouge made a little squeaking sound. *"Squeee!* … Okay, Knuckle, I'll try my best to behave myself."

Immediately, Rouge dropped her act, and addressed Shadow. "How about you, former partner in crime? Want to spank me tonight?"

Looking stern, Shadow strode close to face Rouge. Rouge matched his stare, neither of them blinking.

Amy felt a little nervous at the sight. Years ago, she'd once mistaken Shadow for Sonic, but his attitude and demeanor were all so decidedly different. She wondered how much trouble she'd made for her poor bottom, the next time Shadow decided to spank her.

Then, Shadow narrowed his eyes, and whispered in Rouge's ear. It was close enough that Amy could just make it out. "Rouge? I don't know what's going on here. Help me out. Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Rouge purred in his ear. “I’m always in trouble, handsome. That’s the way I like it.”

“What I mean is… Do you need an extraction? You remember our emergency code word, right?”

Rouge stroked Shadow’s chin, batting her eyelashes. “Oh, you big sweetie. Always thinking of my safety first. Relax, hon. I want you to spank me. And that phrase you’re thinking of? It’s called a ‘safe word.’”

Shadow blinked twice. “You’re pulling my leg. I’ve never heard it called a ‘safe word’ once.”

Rouge shrugged. “You got me. Don’t worry, Highlights, if I’m in trouble, I promise to let you know in clear, simple language. As in, ‘Ack! Help me, Shadow! I’m in big trouble!’ Is that acceptable?”

Shadow nodded. “Good. I don’t really get this whole aspect of team building, yet. I thought they were going to make me do a bunch of stupid ‘trust fall’ exercises. But, as long as you’re safe…” Shadow reached around, hesitantly, and patted Rouge’s bottom. “... Then I’m honored you trust me enough to do this.”

Then Shadow rounded on Amy. “Amy Rose… I haven’t told you this, but even when I suffered from amnesia, and lost all memory of myself, I never forgot what you told me aboard the Space Colony ARK. Thank you. I admire your courage.”

Amy blinked. She hadn’t spoken much to Shadow since that particular incident, but she remembered it well. “I… I had no idea. You’re welcome, Mister Shadow.”

Shadow held up a hand. “Please, just Shadow. I respect Vanilla’s commitment to traditional forms of polite address, but you make me feel like an old man when you call me ‘Mister.’”

Rouge sniffed. “Weren’t you born in the 1950s or something, Boomer?”

“Yes. And you just earned yourself ten extra swats, Rouge.”

Rouge blinked. “Yes, sir, *Mister* Shadow.”

Vanilla cleared her throat. “Ahem! Are you ladies trying to stall for time? I told you to march. Now, get marching!”

Amy and Rouge stood to attention, acting in unison. “Yes, ma’am!”

Vanille crossed her arms. “And finally, girls… let’s get those silly little bottoms nice and bare, just for Mister Hairbrush.”

Slowly, Amy and Rouge reached behind their backs, and exposed their bottoms. Rouge simply had to open the flap of her drop seat, while Amy quickly tucked the back of her Wonder Woman skirt into her belt, and dropped her pajama pants to her ankles.

Quickly, they turned and marched straight to the bathroom.

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They found both bath brushes. Amy winced as she felt the handle of the bath brush. “Oh, man! This is gonna suck! This handle’s extra long. That means more force of impact!”

Rouge’s eyes bulged at the sight of the huge, flat-backed floor scrubbing brush. “Are you kidding? Look at this thing! It’s big enough to cover more than half my butt with every swat!”

Amy rolled her eyes. “That’s deceptive. You’re worried because it looks so big, but a flat back’s actually less bad than a small, round-backed brush. Think about it. This bathbrush is going to land heavier!”

Rouge scowled, squaring up with Amy. “I’m about to get spanked! I don’t like either of these brushes right now, okay?”

Amy gripped the handle of her bath brush, wanting to spank Rouge herself. “Do you *always* have to get the last word in?”

“Do *you* always have to get the last word in?”

Amy grit her teeth, then stopped herself. “You know what? I don’t have to. Let’s not fight, Rouge. Either way, we’re both getting spanked together, right?”

Rouge looked at the brush in her hand. Then she twisted to examine her bare buttocks in the bathroom mirror.

Slowly, Amy mimicked the same pose, their bottoms pressing lightly against each other as they lifted them up to get a good look. The red marks from their switching from that morning were still faintly visible.

Rouge sighed, and stood to face Amy, covering her bottom with her free hand. “You’re absolutely right, Amy Rose. Want to trade brushes? I want to see if you’re right, first hand.”

Amy smiled, and traded brushes with Rouge. “You’re gonna regret it, Rouge.”

Rouge pulled Amy into a hug. “No. I don’t regret anything. Good luck out there, Amy.”

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Amy Rose and Rouge the Bat emerged from the bathroom clutching their brushes tight.

They found their friends seated on seats in a wide circle, all around the living room. Vanilla patted her lap. “And here they are! We’ve decided to let everyone here take a turn spanking you both tonight. Miss Rouge, you’re with me first. I want to show Mr. Knuckles and Mr. Shadow the proper form. Miss Rose, Princess Sally and Mister Sonic have requested the honor of being first to spank you tonight. You know what to do.”

And so they did. Wordlessly, Amy and Rouge approached their appointed disciplinarians, and meekly offered up their brushes. With a practiced motion, Vanilla gracefully pulled Rouge across her lap, and started gently stroking the long-handled bath brush across the bat’s upturned buttocks. “Starting off with the long-handled brush? Bold choice, Miss Rouge.”

Rouge mumbled. “Thank you, Ma’am.”

Meanwhile, Sally took the flat-backed brush from Amy, and patted her lap awkwardly. “Um… I’ve never actually spanked someone before. All my experience is on the other end of the brush. So…”

Amy crawled across Sally’s lap on her own, resting her head on the couch while her legs dangled behind her, straddling Sally’s knee. “Here. When I’m in this position, both of you can spank me at once… Like a team.”

Sally nodded furiously, and patted the brush across Amy’s right buttock. Sonic sidled up beside them, and put a hand on top of Amy’s trembling fingers, patting her across the behind with his free hand. “Are you ready, Amy?”

Amy felt her fingers held close in Sonic’s hand, and returned the gesture. Of course… she wasn’t sure if Sonic loved her. Maybe Sonic still loved Princess Sally. But whatever happened, even if she didn’t get what she wanted, Amy knew everything would be all right. “Yes, Sonic. I am ready for my spanking, please.”

Rouge made a little, whining noise, and arched her back to lift her hips high, letting the drop seat window pull taught across her curvy posterior. “Me too. Please spank me, Mrs. Vanilla.”

Vanilla smiled as she raised the bath brush high. “Good girl!”

Sally and Vanilla landed the first spanks in unison, before both spankers gradually found their own rhythm. Immediately, Amy and Rouge started yelping after every swat.

Sitting on the far site of the room, Cream and Tails watched the proceedings with interest. Cream turned to glance at Tails. “So, Mister Tails, have you ever gotten a spanking before?”

Tails whiskers stood on end. “Oh. I got spanked by my parents a few times, usually only when I did something pretty stupid. I’ve gotten spanked by Sonic before, too.”

“Really? What’s the story behind that?”

By this point, Amy and Rouge’s yells had already taken on a more desperate, wailing quality, as the hairbrush spankings both built to a ferocious tempo.

Tails forced a smile. “How about a rain check? I’ll tell you that story another time, when we’re not… preoccupied.”

Cream tossed her ears lightly. “Very well. I accept your rain check, Mister Tails.”

The last thought that crossed through Amy Rose and Rouge the Bat’s minds, before their first spanking of the night reached the climax, was that they were loved.

The End?

A Red Rear for Vanilla
By Yu May

Vanilla the Rabbit was busying herself with the laundry. She found it strangely relaxing after a long, hectic work day.

After Amy Rose and Rouge the Bat had gotten themselves sentenced to unofficial “community service,” Vanilla had accepted full responsibility for their housing and rehabilitation, including administering old-fashioned discipline. After only two days, Vanilla had already administered multiple spankings to both of the trouble-making young ladies, but she had to admit: Amy and Rouge were certainly making an effort to repay their debt to society.

Then there had been the whole incident with Dr. Robotnik brainwashing Sonic the Hedgehog to serve him as his mindless slave, before launching a full-scale attack on Floral Forest Village and blowing up Vanilla and Cream’s cozy cottage.

All in all, it had been a stressful week.

Thankfully, Sonic had been restored to his former self by the power of love and friendship, and Amy and Rouge had conducted themselves admirably.

Generously, Sonic had offered the Rabbit family a place to stay, along with the rest of their friends, until Vanilla’s house could be rebuilt. The neighbors had already planned a traditional ‘house raising’ for next week, but until then… Vanilla would have to make do. And she refused to be a freeloader.

Vanilla stretched as she finished loading the next batch of dirty laundry, before noticing one last outfit from the previous load in the dryer. “Oops, there you are. Looks like to belong to…”

Vanilla pulled out one of Rouge the Bat’s infamous skin-tight outfits. There was no mistaking that absurd, heart-shaped, strapless boob armor. Vanilla rolled her eyes. “Ugh… of course this is the one outfit that survived the house fire.”

Vanilla took a deep breath. “No. I mustn’t judge poor Rouge. She simply had a different upbringing than most folks around here. Still, how does she expect anyone to take her seriously, strutting around with her boobies almost hanging out for all the world to…”

Vanilla took a closer look at Rouge’s outfit. “One-size-fits-all? Huh. Must be some kind of spandex. But it’s so soft to the touch. Wonder who the textilist is…G.U.N. Scientific Research for Operational Combat Kinesiology? Goodness! I don’t think I’m ever likely to find a bolt of this material for sale at the sewing shop.”

Vanilla's ears stood on end, and she peeked out the back of the door behind her. In the living room, Sonic, Knuckles, Tails, Amy, and the entire crew from the Freedom Fighters were quietly snoozing.

Slowly, Vanilla closed the sliding door to the laundry room, and held up the outfit, looking at herself in the mirror. "I wonder how it breathes?"

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Vanilla took a soft breath as she caressed the smooth fabric, which lay like soft cotton against her skin. She twisted to examine her rump in the mirror, blushing slightly. "Feels like I'm wearing nothing at all!"

But as Vanilla straightened, she felt her breasts jiggle, and quickly fixed her top. "Oh, heavens, what am I doing? Just imagine if Papa could see me in this absurd get-up… Though I'm sure he wouldn't tease me too badly."

Noticing herself in the mirror, Vanilla smiled, and struck a pose. "Well… Hello there, Mister. Fancy meeting you here… Oh, this old thing? Something I borrowed from a friend… Why, yes, I *was* voted the Cheesecake Bunny Girl of the year in 2002. I'm flattered you recognize me."

"No way? I love that issue! Can I get an autograph on your centerfold picture?"

Vanilla squeaked, and pressed up flat against the mirror, as if hugging her own reflection. "Eek! Who is–"

Rouge the Bat was standing behind her, still wearing her Catwoman-themed pajamas. Rouge held out a magazine, and flipped it open to reveal a slightly-PG image of a younger Vanilla the Rabbit, coyly chewing a carrot. Vanilla was wearing a skin-tight bunny-girl costume, along with her apron that proclaimed her the Chili Dog Cookoff Champion of 2002. "Gotcha! I knew I'd seen that apron somewhere before. You're a celebrity!"

Vanilla buried her face in her hands, blushing beet red. "Oh, Miss Rouge—please, please, please—don't mention this to Cream and the others! I was in college! I don't want Cream getting the wrong idea about her Dad and me!"

"And what idea is that?"

"He was a writer, and we… we *both* read those kinds of magazines for the articles! Then one thing led to another, and… I just don't want Cream to think she ever has to use her body as a tool to seduce a man. If Cream ever decides to get married, I want her to marry someone who loves her as a person, not just as a piece of meat."

“And is that what you did? Did your husband treat you like you were more than a piece of meat?”

“Of course! He… he was always such a great listener. He made me feel like I was sexy, so I wanted to be sexy… but only for him. We got married a year after the photoshoot.”

“Then you have nothing to be ashamed of. I’d say you were still a great role-model, even all the way back in 2002.”

“Thank you, Rouge, but please, will you promise not to show that to Cream? Some of those photos… are not family-friendly!”

Rouge folded the magazine, and tucked it under her armpit. “Your secret is safe with me, Vanilla. Still… I am a little annoyed with you for borrowing my clothes, without asking permission.”

Vanilla bowed her head. “Yes, that was completely thoughtless of me. I apologize, Rouge. I promise to never touch your clothes ever again.”

Rouge hummed, and tapped her foot. “Hmmm… I forgive you.”

Vanilla sighed with relief, her chest heaving. “Thank you.”

Rouge kept tapping her foot. “Though, I have to wonder: if you had caught *me* snooping around *your* intimates… what sort of conversation might we be having right about now?”

Vanilla blinked. “Well… I’d probably give you a stern talking to, about how that wasn’t a very respectful thing to do. Um, I really am very sorry, Miss Rouge. I hope… you can find it in your heart to forgive me?”

“I already have forgiven you. My point is… it hardly seems fair. If Amy or I ever did something so naughty under your roof, we’d definitely be getting our bare butt spanked.”

Vanilla flashed a buck-toothed smile, which failed to disguise her nerves. “Oh, but Miss Rouge, surely you recall when I caught Amy trying on one of your outfits? It was only yesterday! And we both agreed, Amy didn’t deserve a spanking, just for a silly mistake like that.”

“Sure. *I* agreed Amy didn’t deserve a spanking for that. But you’re older than Amy. I should think you knew a bit better. In fact, I *know* that you know better, because you gave Amy a good tongue-lashing for doing the same thing you just did. Surely you recall. It was only yesterday!”

Vanilla took a deep breath. “Point taken, Miss Rouge… I have not practiced what I preach. Are you… suggesting that I should do something, to make amends?”

Rouge smirked. “Well, if you ask my opinion… I think you’ve been a bad girl. And you deserve a good spanking.”

Vanilla nodded, her breath shaky. “I see… And if I disagree… Can I assume everyone will know all about my shameful behavior, by tomorrow morning?”

Rouge’s smile disappeared. “What? No, no of course not! I made a promise, and that’s that. Look, why don’t you hold onto this…”

Rouge pulled out the old magazine and handed it to Vanilla. “There, you keep that. Now it’s your word against mine. I’m sorry if you thought I was trying to blackmail you. I’ll just… go now.”

As Rouge turned, Vanilla touched her on the shoulder. “Wait, Rouge. I’m the one who should be sorry. I’ve misjudged you… To be honest, I think I misjudged you from the very beginning. I stereotyped you as a ‘bad girl,’ based on little things. But really, you’re an honorable, courageous young woman. Really, the way I’ve been acting, I have no right to spank you.”

Rouge waved a finger. “Nah, uh! None of that self-recrimination. I was gunning for a spanking, and you had every right to spank me. You remember our agreement? I promised to trust you to be fair. That has not changed.”

“And can you forgive me, for not trusting you?”

Rouge thumbed the collar of her pajamas, and flashed a sassy smile. “Of course I can. And you *shouldn’t* trust me quite yet, because I’m still a sneak. I was already planning to tease you about the magazine. I just got lucky enough to catch you red-handed. But I know you’re sorry, so that’s that.”

Vanilla shook her head. “No, Rouge. It’s not enough for me to say I’m sorry. I have to be prepared to make ammends… I… I will accept *whatever* consequence you believe is fair, as the punishment for my behavior.”

Rouge raised an eyebrow. “Even a spanking?”

Vanilla hung her head. “Yes… I think a spanking would be… perfectly fair.”

Vanilla shuffled her feet. “I suppose… we should wait until morning, so we don’t wake the others? You can… explain the situation at breakfast, before you spank me.”

Rouge giggled. “That won’t do, silly! I promised to keep your secret, remember? Besides, I’m not letting you stall this spanking a moment longer. So we’ll just have to continue this discussion…” Rouge held out her hand. “...in the woodshed. Come along, Mrs. Vanilla.”

Vanilla thrilled at the mention of the woodshed. Then, she took Rouge's hand, and allowed herself to be led to her fate.

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Fortunately (or not-so-fortunately, depending on who you asked), the woodshed was completely untouched by the fire.

Rouge found the high-backed wooden chair in the middle of the room, and leaned against it. "All right, Mrs. Vanilla. We will start with a hand spanking as a warmup. Then—um—you're getting the hairbrush!"

"Yes, Miss Rouge. But I'm afraid I don't keep a hairbrush in the woodshed. Would you like me to fetch one for you?"

Rouge glanced at the wall of implements behind her. "Oh! No need for that. We're already here so—erm—we'll just use one of these implements…" Desperately, Rouge scanned the wall, looking for an implement she recognized by name. "Fetch me one of the paddles, Mrs. Vanilla. The biggest one!"

Rouge curtsied. "Yes, ma'am."

Rouge felt her whole body trembling, and rubbed her hands together. This was it! Finally, it was her turn to spank Mrs. Vanilla. When she'd first hatched this plan, part of Rouge had wondered whether she would be the one taking a trip to the woodshed. But this was working even better than she'd ever dared to hope!

Suddenly, Vanilla appeared at Rouge's side, holding the paddle. "Here you are, Miss Rouge."

Her eyes shining, Rouge accepted the paddle. As she backed up into the chair, Rouge almost tripped, then caught herself by sitting down roughly. "Oop!"

Rouge looked at the paddle, then at Vanilla. "Ahem! Mrs. Vanilla, are you ready… for your spanking?"

Vanilla nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'm ready. Will you bare my bottom before the warm up? Or should I bare myself for you?"

Rouge clutched the paddle. "Oh! I wanna do it, please!"

Automatically, Vanilla raised her hands, and held them behind her head, then took a step forward to stand directly in front of Rouge. "Yes, ma'am."

Rouge reached for the elastic waistband of Vanilla's skin tight spandex, then remembered she was still holding the paddle. Quickly, Rouge set down the paddle, then stroked her hands along the sides of Vanilla's hips. "Hee, hee… Now, let's get this naughty little bunny bummy nice and bare. Turn around for me."

"Yes, ma'am."

As Vanilla turned, Rouge got an eyeful of her motherly, child-bearing hips. Slowly, Rouge glided down Vanilla's pants, revealing plain, pristinely clean, lilac-white panties. Stars shone in Rouge's eyes. Then, there was a sharp clatter as the paddle fell over. Rouge yelped, and jerked down the pants the rest of the way to Vanilla's knees.

Rouge spotted the paddle, and tried to reach for it, but the handle had fallen far away from her. Vanilla peeked over her shoulder. "Would you like me to fetch the paddle, ma'am?"

Rouge sat up. "Yes! Um… that paddle's just going to get in the way. Where's a good place to put it?"

"I could set it under the chair for now. Or I could hold onto it for you. It will remind me of what I have coming to me next, after the warm-up."

Rouge nodded. "That's awesome! Now, get across my lap!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Vanilla lay herself gracefully across Rouge's thighs, and set the paddle down on the floor in front of her. Rouge felt the full weight of the larger woman pressing down on her. Vanilla was so tall, her toes reached the floor on one side of the chair, while she was forced to rest the weight of her upper torso on her elbows.

Instinctively, Rouge wrapped an arm around Vanilla's waist, then finally noticed she'd forgotten to bare Vanilla's bottom, like she'd promised to. "Ah! We will… start with a spanking over your panties. Better enjoy this while it lasts, because you won't be wearing these undies for long!"

Vanilla flicked up her white, cotton tail. "Yes, ma'am. I understand. Thank you, ma'am."

Rouge landed a sharp clap across Rouge's bottom, then quickly found her rhythm. Rouge raised her hand as high as she could reach, and started swinging her arm up and down in a clockwork motion. With each stroke, Rouge made a cute little grunt of exertion. She lost count after the first ten swats or so, then wondered how many she should give. Rouge settled on one hundred as a good number, and started to count silently. But as she took in the sight of the ripples traveling through Vanilla's seat after every slap. Then, Rouge realized she had lost count. Rouge peeked at the exposed area under the panty line, hoping to make out a soft, pink color beneath Vanilla's short, downy rabbit fur, but there were no visible marks yet.

With a smirk, Rouge patted Vanilla's bottom playfully. "Well, young lady, are you learning your lesson?"

Vanilla nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'm very sorry for what I've done wrong… May I speak freely, ma'am?"

"Sure. What's up?"

Vanilla's tail drooped down. "I don't mean this with any disrespect, ma'am, but… Those spanks didn't hurt very much. I feel a sting, but to make this punishment more effective, you may need to spank me a bit harder."

Rouge scowled. "I'm spanking you *precisely* as I mean to. This is just the warm up, after all. None of that *backseat* driving. Got it?"

Rouge popped her a good one across the seat of Vanilla's panties to emphasize the word "backseat."

Vanilla stiffened, her tail standing to attention. "Yes, ma'am."

Rouge sniffed. "Good. Then let's have these off."

Immediately, Vanilla lifted her hips, and Rouge recalled how much fuss she'd made about being bared earlier this week, when she had found herself in this exact position. As Rouge glided down Vanilla's panties, she drooped her ears. Even now, she didn't feel like she was particularly in charge of Vanilla. "Good girl, Vanilla. You've been very compliant so far."

Unmistakably, Vanilla wagged her tail. "Thank you, ma'am!"

Rouge pouted, and raised her hand high. This wasn't exactly what she'd imagined it would be like. She'd wanted to hear Vanilla cry and plead, at least a little. *"It's not that I'm a sadist, it's just… I'd like Vanilla to know that I can dish it out, as good as I can take it!"* she thought.

Rouge began to spank, concentrating on her delivery. Remembering her martial arts training, something clicked, and Rouge figured out what she'd been doing wrong before. Her earlier movements had been too "snappy." She needed to combine a little fluidity in her arm, and a firm follow through with her wrist. Instantly, Rouge could both see and hear the difference. The claps were more resounding, and the impacts sent more reverberations through Vanilla's buttocks. Vanilla made a soft little noise, and clenched her glutes. "Mmf!"

With a smile, Rouge landed a solid clap at that precise moment, and thrilled as she felt the difference. Vanilla had a little puppy fat, but as a rabbit, she also had some firm, lean muscle underneath the surface. Rouge was pleased to discover that her spanks were landing with enough wumph to make a deeper impression.

Rouge carried on at a brisk pace, nailing each and every swat. “Is *this* a hard enough spanking to make a lasting impression on you, Mrs. Vanilla?”

Vanilla gasped. “Ah! Y-yes, ma’am. Yes, please. Oof! That’s hard enough!”

Rouge flashed a pouty smile. “Hmmph! That’s not up to you, Missy. Now, hold still.”

“Ow—Yes, M-Miss Rouge—Ouch!”

Immediately, Rouge increased the pace of the spanking, without letting up on the force. Rouge felt a sweat building up. This was a real workout. Vanilla gasped once, then hissed. “Ssshaw!”

Catching her breath, Rouge started spanking as fast as she possibly could. “Stop! Pretending! This! Spanking! Doesn’t! Hurt!”

“It hurts! It really hurts, ma’am! I’m sorry!”

Rouge delivered the last spank, gasping for air, then examined the results. There was indeed a warm, pinkish glow covering Vanilla’s entire bottom, visible even through the layer of fur. “Had enough, yet?”

Vanilla took steady breaths. “That… That was an excellent spanking. Thank you, Miss Rouge.”

Rouge landed a hard spank smack-dab across the center of Vanilla's buttocks, and let her hand linger, stroking the soft flesh. She could feel a gentle heat rising beneath her palm. “That was not a proper answer to my question. I expect a simple, ‘Yes, ma’am,’ or, ‘No, ma’am.’ Have you had enough, Mrs. Vanilla?”

Vanilla’s bottom quivered, and for the first time since spanking began, she looked over her shoulder, to look Rouge in the eye. “N-no, ma’am…”

Rouge landed another spank. “That’s right! I believe I promised you a paddling next. Hand me the paddle, Mrs. Vanilla.”

Trembling, Vanilla took a shaky breath. “Yes, ma’am.”

Vanilla had to slowly shift her weight to rest on her knees, then held up the paddle high over her own head. Rouge stretched to reach the paddle, and tapped it across Vanilla’s bottom. The weight felt awkward in her hand. Then, Rouge brought the paddle down with a quick snap of her wrist. The paddle connected with plenty of force, but something was off. Rouge felt like her arm was in the wrong spot.

As she examined the paddle, Rouge finally put two and two together. It was meant to be gripped with two hands, like a greatsword. Rouge wanted to kick herself. “Stand up, Mrs. Vanilla.”

Slowly, Mrs. Vanilla stood to her full height, towering above Rouge, and put her hands behind her head. Rouge stood, and stepped back from the chair, gesturing to it with the paddle. “Since you were old enough to know better than go snooping through my things, I think you deserve to get a full set of twenty strokes with the paddle. Any objections?”

Vanilla swallowed a lump in her throat. “That’s… that’s a lot of strokes to use with that paddle.”

“Oh yeah? You gave me twenty with the paddle, the first time I was here.”

Vanilla bowed her head. “Yes, Miss Rouge. But I only used the one-handed paddle on you… When I use the two-handed paddle, I don’t like to give many more than six swats. Twelve at the most. It… it really lands hard.”

Rouge gripped the paddle tight in two hands. “And who decides how many strokes you deserve to get? Me or you?”

“You do, ma’am.”

“So if I say you’re getting twenty whacks, then you’re gonna take what’s coming to you. Got it, Vanilla?”

Two tears dripped from Vanilla’s eyes. “Yes, Rouge… P-please punish me, as you see fit… I trust you.”

That gave Rouge pause. She remembered what Vanilla had said earlier, about not wanting to have to spank. Before, it had sounded like a load of baloney, but now, Rouge felt the weight of her situation.

Rouge looked at the paddle in her hands, and saw it in a new light. What if Vanilla decided to spank her with this later, as a bit of revenge. *“This thing could leave bruises!”* thought Rouge.

Rouge looked Vanilla deep in the eyes. “And I trust you. You will get *ten* strokes with this paddle. If you hold still, and take it well, that will be it. But watch it. If I get any trouble from you, you’ll get extras.”

Vanilla exhaled sharply, and nodded. “Yes, ma’am… Thank you, ma’am…”

Rouge glanced at the chair. “In that case… assume the position, Vannie.”

Vanilla sniffled. “Yes, Rouge.”

Carefully, Vanilla dropped her panties, the rest of the way down to her ankles, and stepped out of her spandex pants. Then she took a steady stance, rested her hands on the seat of the chair, and arched her back to present her backside as a target.

Rouge took a test swing to get the feel for the paddle. Then she tapped it a few times across Vanilla's buttocks, gliding the rough wooden surface along the smooth furry flesh. "Are you ready for your paddling, Mrs. Vanilla?"

Vanilla quickly brushed her ears over her shoulder, and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I am ready."

Rouge landed the paddle with a full, baseball bat swing. Immediately, Vanilla howled, louder than any noise she'd made so far all night. Rouge's eyes went wide as she took in the sight. She'd just flattened both of Vanilla's butt cheeks like they were two pancakes. Vanilla choked for air, and recited in a steady voice. "One, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

Rouge raised the paddle high. Suddenly, she remembered something her mom had said, before spanking her. "This hurts me, more than it hurts you."

Rouge landed the second stroke of the paddle. This time, Vanilla let out a quick yelp, and bounced on the balls of her feet. But her voice was noticeably more strained. "Two, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

Rouge answered with a third, grand-slam-homerun-style swing. Vanilla hummed, and shed fresh tears. "Three, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

But after she felt the fourth stroke, Vanilla screamed freely. "Aaw-haaarghh! … Oh, dear! Four, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

Rouge gripped the paddle tight. She felt genuinely sorry for Vanilla. But she also wanted to hear some tears. Keeping her eyes on the target, swung the paddle with extra follow through, as if trying to knock the baseball all the way out of the park. Rouge would have easily knocked Vanilla over the chair, if the athletic, amazonian rabbit hadn't caught herself. "Owwww! Uuwaaah! BAW!"

And there they were. The unmistakable sound of real, unrestrained, cries. Rouge caught a glimpse of Vanilla's sparkling tears as they dripped freely down to splatter on the chair. "Remember your count, Mrs. Vanilla."

"Five, ma'am! Thank you, ma'am! Oh, please–"

"No, none of that whining. Look me in the eye, Vanilla."

Her shoulders quivering, Vanilla looked at Rouge, snot and tears dribbling down her face. Still, she managed to sniff, and steady her stance.

Holding eye contact, Rouge strolled around Vanilla, tapped the back of the chair with her paddle. "I promised you another five strokes with the paddle. That means you're halfway to the

finish line. Grip the chair, and grit your teeth. I don't want you to bite your tongue. Can you do that?"

Vanilla nodded, and tightened her grip. "Yes, ma'am!"

Rouge strolled back to her original position, and stroked the paddle back and forth along Vanilla's bottom, then tapped to get the feel for her swing. She raised the paddle high, but didn't bring it down right away. Rouge watched, and waited. Vanilla kept perfectly still, her cotton tail twitching as she held it high. Finally, Rouge landed the sixth, shuddering blast with the paddle.

Vanilla screeched, her voice cracking, and kicked up a leg behind her. Then she quickly set it down. "Six, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am. I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"I'm sorry for kicking, ma'am."

Rouge hummed, then tapped the paddle across Vanilla's lower bottom, pressing it gently against her upper thighs and sit-spots. "Should you get a few extra strokes, for kicking?"

"I… I normally don't give extra strokes for flinching, unless it's for rubbing, or leaving the spanking position entirely. I try to be understanding."

"That's not what I asked. Should *you* get extras, for kicking?"

"I… I don't… Yes, ma'am. I deserve extras. I'm old enough to know better."

Rouge started to tap Vanilla gently, at a steady rhythm. "And you were doing so well… If I give you extras, that will bring you up to twelve, at least. You're not even at the halfway point, any more!"

Vanilla hunched her shoulders. "Yes, ma'am."

Tap, tap, tap.

Rouge smiled. "One last question, Vanilla. Do you remember when you put me across your knee, right here in this woodshed, with a bar of soap in my mouth?"

"Yes, Rouge. I remember."

"Are you the least bit sorry for doing that, now that you find yourself in this position?"

Vanilla shook her head. "No, Miss Rouge. I believe I did the right thing."

“Hmm, I agree. The point of a spanking is to teach the spankee a lesson. And I think I’ve learned a thing or two from you already…”

Rouge pulled the paddle away from Rouge’s bottom. “Spanking’s over, Vanilla.”

Vanilla glanced over her shoulder. “But, you promised me at least ten strokes!”

“I did. But I’ve reconsidered. You’ve let me off the hook early a couple times, when you could have kept whaling on me. I don’t want to spank you anymore, Vanilla. It just wouldn’t feel fair to you. Therefore…”

Vanilla’s face brightened, before Rouge snapped her arm, and pointed at the spiked chair. “I’ll just put you in time out. Go find your seat, Mrs. Vanilla. You know the one I mean.”

Vanilla’s ears drooped, her lip quivering. “Yes, Miss Rouge.”

Gracefully, Vanilla stood. Walking a bit stiffly, she strode to the spiked chair, and sat herself down with poise, folding her hands in her lap. Vanilla pursed her lips once, then exhaled.

Rouge glanced at Vanilla’s feet, which were resting firmly on the floor. “Nice try. Feet up on the first rung of the stool. Rest your full weight down on that naughty, big bottom of yours.”

Vanilla’s eyes popped open. Scowling, Vanilla gripped the sides of the stool and lifted herself up, pouting petulantly. Then she slapped her bottom down flat against the spikes, and winced. “Ooch… Oh, fuh… fudgcicles!”

“Careful. Do I need to wash your mouth out with soap, old lady?”

Vanilla flashed her buck-teeth in a grimace. “*Old* lady?”

Rouge shrugged. “Older than me, I mean. I was about to say, ‘young lady’ but I was worried that would offend your pride.”

With an effort, Vanilla took her hands off the stool, and crossed her arms. Despite her stoic expression, Vanilla was clearly struggling to endure the spikes. “Thank you. I accept your compliment to my dignity.”

“Now, where’d we leave that bar of soap?”

Vanilla went stiff as a board. “But… I didn’t use naughty words!”

“I dunno. ‘Fudgicles’ is pushing it.”

Slowly, Vanilla raised her feet up to the second rung, wincing as she felt her weight shift, and settled back down. “I left the soap with the cleaning supplies by the workbench… Would you like me to fetch it for you?”

Rouge flashed her bat fangs. “No need. I want you to keep your truck parked right there. Think hard about what you did, to earn this treatment.”

Vanilla nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I promise you, I’ll never so much as touch one of your outfits, for as long as I live.”

“Hold on. I *didn’t* say you can’t borrow one of my outfits. I got a thousand of those old things from G.U.N.’s surplus store. Heck, you can keep that one, if you want.”

Suddenly, Vanilla remembered exactly how much her outfit was leaving to the imagination, down to the square inch. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly… Besides, what occasion would I ever have to wear something this bold?”

“On your next hot date?”

Vanilla shuffled on her seat. “Oh, I’ve thought about dating again, but… It’s a lot harder as a single mother. For one thing, I refuse to date a man who couldn’t be a good father to Cream. I will not allow boyfriend troubles to disrupt Cream’s childhood.”

“So that means you kind of have to land a Prince Charming, in one go?”

“Exactly… Or, at least, he has to be a good man, first and foremost. I’m not that picky about looks.”

Rouge examined the sight of Vanilla, enjoying the picture of penitence she had painted. “Hmm… Well, I hope you find a bonafide, tried-and-true Prince Charming. If you do, I’ll be sure to give him a demonstration, of how to properly handle a strong-willed gal like yourself… I think you definitely benefit from the *firm-handed* approach.”

Vanilla bowed her head. “I… I really do, actually. Thank you, Rouge. It’s been a long time since I had someone who could take me to the woodshed.”

Rouge flew across the room to put away the paddle, and landed back in front of Vanilla. “Me too… My mom used to take a *chancla* to the seat of my pants, when I was being a brat. That was the last time I got spanked, before I met you.”

“May I meet your mother, Miss Rouge? I’d love to compare notes.”

“Oh… That’s a bit… complicated. I love my mom, it’s just that… the spankings were always a bit of a sore spot for me. See, the last spanking I got was at age sixteen, and… I was not happy about it.”

“I’m sorry. Forgive me for prying.”

“It’s okay. Mom and I patched things up. She was a good Mom, she’s just a tad… hectic. See, she was the one who trained me for my first job.”

“Really? What field?”

“Safe cracking. We used to have a mother-daughter jewel heist together every Friday, right after preschool.”

Vanilla blinked, twice. “Oh… That makes so much more sense, now. Well, if you’re ever comfortable introducing us, the offer remains open.”

Rouge beamed. “Thanks, Vanilla. I don’t think I’ll be washing your mouth out with soap. You may leave time out now… And you may rub your bottom, if you want. Spanking’s over.”

Vanilla shot to her feet, and caressed the injured area. Then, there was the sound of a rooster’s crow, and a beam of sunlight spilled through the sun-shaped window carved in the door.

Vanilla froze. “It’s morning? But… that means everyone will be up and at it by now!”

Rouge peeked through the window. “Not necessarily. Maybe they all decided to sleep in for a few—”

Cream the Rabbit’s voice called from outside the door. “Mommy? Oh, Mother, where are you? I want to help cook breakfast for everybody!”

Vanilla slapped her face. “Nooo! If Cream sees me like this…”

Suddenly, she noticed her pants and undies and raced to find them. “... I’ll just die of embarrassment!"

Rouge waved her hands. “Stay calm! Once she heads back to the Donut Lord’s house, we can just sneak back—”

There was a sharp knock at the door. “Miss Rouge? Mother? Are you in there?”

Vanilla was struggling to pull on her panties.

Rouge looked at the look of despair in Vanilla's eyes, and sighed. "Cream? It's me, Rouge. Could you give your mom and me a few minutes? I'm not, um, *decent* at the moment. And your mother… She's gotta give me a spanking. Please, I don't want you to… see my bare bottom."

"What? Already? It's the crack of dawn! How did you manage to earn a spanking already?"

Vanilla pulled up the spandex pants, struggling to fit her behind back into them. "N-never you mind about that, Cream. Rouge has asked you to give her some privacy. Now, what do you say?

"Yes, mother. My apologies for disturbing you, Miss Rouge. I'll go get breakfast started. Don't worry, Mother! I'll remember not to turn on the stove until you're there to supervise!"

Vanilla yanked up her pants, then looked down at her wildly immodest, femme-fatalle outfit. It was a minor improvement. "See you soon, Cream! … Um… Miss Rouge…"

Vanilla held up her hands. "It's time for your spanking!"

Then, Vanilla started clapping her hands vigorously. Rouge frowned, before she realized what the plan was, and started pretending to cry. "Ooh! Owwie! Ouchie-wa-wa! Um–I'm sorry, Mrs. Vanilla–I'm a bad girl!"

They kept up the act for another few moments, until Rouge saw Cream was gone, and gave Vanilla a thumbs up. "We're clear! Let's get you home and dressed!"

"But, how? If Cream's already up, then everyone else must be–"

"Just follow my lead. Keep an eye out for corners, and stay out of the line of sight of any windows. And… go!"

"What? Now? Can we count to three?"

"Three!" Rouge burst out the door, and slid along the side of the woodshed.

Vanilla squeaked, and followed at a sprint, mimicking Rouge's every step. Vanilla whispered. "Are we sneaking in through the window?"

"No good. Leads right to the kitchen. The straightest shot is through the front door."

"But that will take us past the living room!"

"No. We gotta go *through* the living room, remember?"

"What? Why do you have my neighbor's floor plan memorized?"

“You always got to scope a new place out for possible escape routes, Vanilla. Now, on my signal… three!”

Covering her face in her hands, Vanilla sprinted after Rouge, straight for the front door. “Not ready! Not ready!”

A neighbor’s front door opened, and Honey the Squirrel spotted two people sprinting past her. “Huh? Who’s running around in their pajamas this early in the morning?”

Honey’s mother appeared behind her, wearing a bathrobe. “Honey? What are you doing outside in your pajamas?”

“I saw two weirdos running around outside, in *their* pajamas!”

“Honey… Are you telling stories.”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then who was it?”

“I dunno. She covered her face.”

“Huh. Must be some of those big-city kids playing pranks. Streaking, or some sort of nonsense. Let’s get you some breakfast. Then… you and I have another appointment at Mrs. Vanilla’s woodshed!”

Honey sighed, and dropped the seat of her pajamas to reveal her bottom, which was still slightly pink from last night’s bedtime spanking. “Yes, mother.”

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Rouge and Vanilla burst inside Sheriff Tom’s house, and slammed the door behind them. Vanilla was hyperventilating. Rouge held up a hand, made a few quick signals in sign language, and snuck off.

Vanilla did a double take. “What? What does…” Vanilla imitated the sign language wildly. “...that mean?”

“Shush!”

“Don’t you shush me while I’m talking to you, young–”

Rouge pressed her finger hard against Vanilla’s lips.

Then, Amy Rose and Princess Sally Acorn walked right past the livingroom doorway in their pajamas, stretching. Amy yawned. “Mrs. Vanilla? Are you up? We want to help make the boys breakfast in bed.”

Cream called from the kitchen. “Mom’s in the woodshed. Miss Rouge is getting another spanking, I’m sad to say.”

Princess Sally narrowed her eyes. “What? Already? What kind of trouble could Rouge have possibly gotten into?”

Amy answered in a deadpan tone of voice. “Well, I suppose bats *are* nocturnal. But then, how’d Vanilla catch her so fast?”

“That’s exactly what I wondered. But Mother told me I need to respect Rouge’s privacy, so that’s exactly what I’m gonna… Oops. I shouldn’t have mentioned this at all, should I?”

Vanilla whispered. “It’s no use! There are too many of them!”

“Courage Vanilla. Just follow my signal.”

“Which signal? You mean ‘three’?”

“No, I mean–” Rouge made three silent hand gestures.

“But what does that even mean?”

“It means… When *I* do *this*… *you* haul ass to the laundry room.”

“Miss Rouge, there is absolutely no need for that sort of crass language.”

There was a whir of heavy gears and pneumatics as Bunnie Rabbot stomped toward the kitchen. “Morning, y’all. Land sakes, is Princess Sally in the kitchen? We barely survived her last attempt to cook breakfast.”

Sally harrumphed. “Hey! I know how to cook… I mean, I could make a salad.”

Rouge flailed her arms, making dozens of new signs in quick succession. Before Vanilla could complain, Rouge held up three fingers, and bolted into the living room. Vanilla followed, shielding her eyes as she crossed past the kitchen.

Just as they reached the entrance to the laundry room, Sonic the Hedgehog woke up, and kicked up and out of bed, landing right in front of them. *“Yawn!* Oh, man, did I have a weird dream. I had to give a speech, but I didn’t have any clothes on. Talk about embarrassing!”

Sonic pulled on his two white gloves. “There. It’s okay, ladies, now, I’m fully–”

Sonic saw the laundry room door slam shut in front of him. “... dressed?”

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Vanilla donned her modest formal dress in record time. Rouge held the door shut. “Okay, we made it… Good work, Vanilla.”

Vanilla finished tying her sash. “Thank you, Rouge. I owe you a great debt.”

Rouge shrugged. “Eh, you let me off without a spanking in the woodshed this morning. I’d say we’re even, Vanilla.”

Vanilla bent low, and kissed Rouge on the forehead. “I will never forget your kindness. One last thing… Remember to refer to me as ‘Mrs. Vanilla’ when we’re in front of company.”

Rouge blinked. “Oh… of course. I’m still doing community service.”

Vanilla patted Rouge on the shoulder. “Yes… But when it’s just you and me… Please, call me Vanilla.”

Vanilla pressed something against Rouge’s chest, and patted it gently. “And thank you… for spanking me.”

Rouge looked down, and saw that Vanilla had returned her copy of the magazine. She opened it up to the centerfold, and sure enough, Vanilla had written her signature.

The End